

# FISHY BUSINESS: TRAFFICKING AND LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN THE GLOBAL SEAFOOD INDUSTRY

Seafood is one of the world's most important commodities. Now, more than ever, this industry is essential to the livelihood, food security and nutrition of many people across the globe.

Around one billion people worldwide rely on fish or seafood as a major source of protein<sup>1</sup>. Australia is no exception: we love our seafood.

Whilst Australia has a large seafood industry, most products are exported to foreign markets, where they are more profitable<sup>2</sup>.

This means almost three-quarters of the seafood products we enjoy in Australia, or 200,000 tonnes a year, are imported<sup>3</sup>. This seafood is predominately supplied from Asia<sup>4</sup> – where a high prevalence of trafficking and labour exploitation is reported in the fishing and seafood processing industries<sup>5</sup> – leaving a bad taste in the mouth.

## Fast facts:

- Over 90 percent of all fishers and fish workers are small scale operators, with the majority living in developing countries<sup>6</sup>.
- The world fishing fleet consists of over four million vessels. Almost three-quarters of these vessels operate in Asia<sup>7</sup>.
- Thailand is Australia's principal source of canned tuna and frozen prawns<sup>8</sup>.
- Seafood production supports the livelihoods of approximately 10 percent of the world's population<sup>9</sup>.
- Seafood is used as an ingredient in many processed products including pet food, fish sauce, Worcestershire sauce and medicinal products such as fish and krill oil.



DON'T TRADE LIVES FACTSHEET



# CHILD LABOUR IN THE INFORMAL FISHING SECTOR

Child labour is particularly common in small scale, informal fishing activities in developing countries<sup>10</sup>. This is particularly so in Asia and the Pacific – the biggest seafood producing region in the world<sup>11</sup>. In poor communities, where small scale fishing is common practice, it is acceptable for children to work alongside their families<sup>12</sup>. As traditional fishing skills and knowledge are culturally important, they are often passed down from generation to generation<sup>13</sup>.

Some of these activities can be positive and provide children with practical and social skills<sup>14</sup>. However, if a child's family is living in extreme poverty, they often

work at the expense of their education and personal development. Even if a child can access an education, working excessive hours and performing physically demanding tasks means they may be too exhausted to concentrate in class, preventing them from reaching their full potential. This is often an unintentional outcome of poverty, but the damage to the child's future development remains.

In severe cases, children are forced to work in even more dangerous conditions.



Photo: Albert Yu/ World Vision



## Terror on a Thai boat

Non\* had hopes for a better life. A trusted friend said they could earn better wages if they crossed from Laos into Thailand. Together, they crossed the Mekong River at night. Then Non was hurried into the back of a van. When it reached the Thai coast, Non was finally let out. His friend had vanished.

At 17 years old, Non was forced to work on a Thai fishing boat, under the watchful eye of men with guns. He was threatened with beatings if he worked too slowly. Sometimes he was beaten for no reason. For two years, he lived aboard the boat, working from early morning and well into the night. He slept on a crowded deck with 40 other men.

Non often despaired and thought he might never see his home again.

During a brief stint onshore one day, the guards left him alone. Seizing the opportunity, he ran away through the jungle, afraid his captors would track him down and kill him. Finally, Non was helped to reach the Lao embassy in Bangkok, and then back to his village. On arriving back home he thought: "I am alive. I will survive now."

World Vision worked with Non to provide rehabilitative support to help settle into life back home.

\*Name has been changed

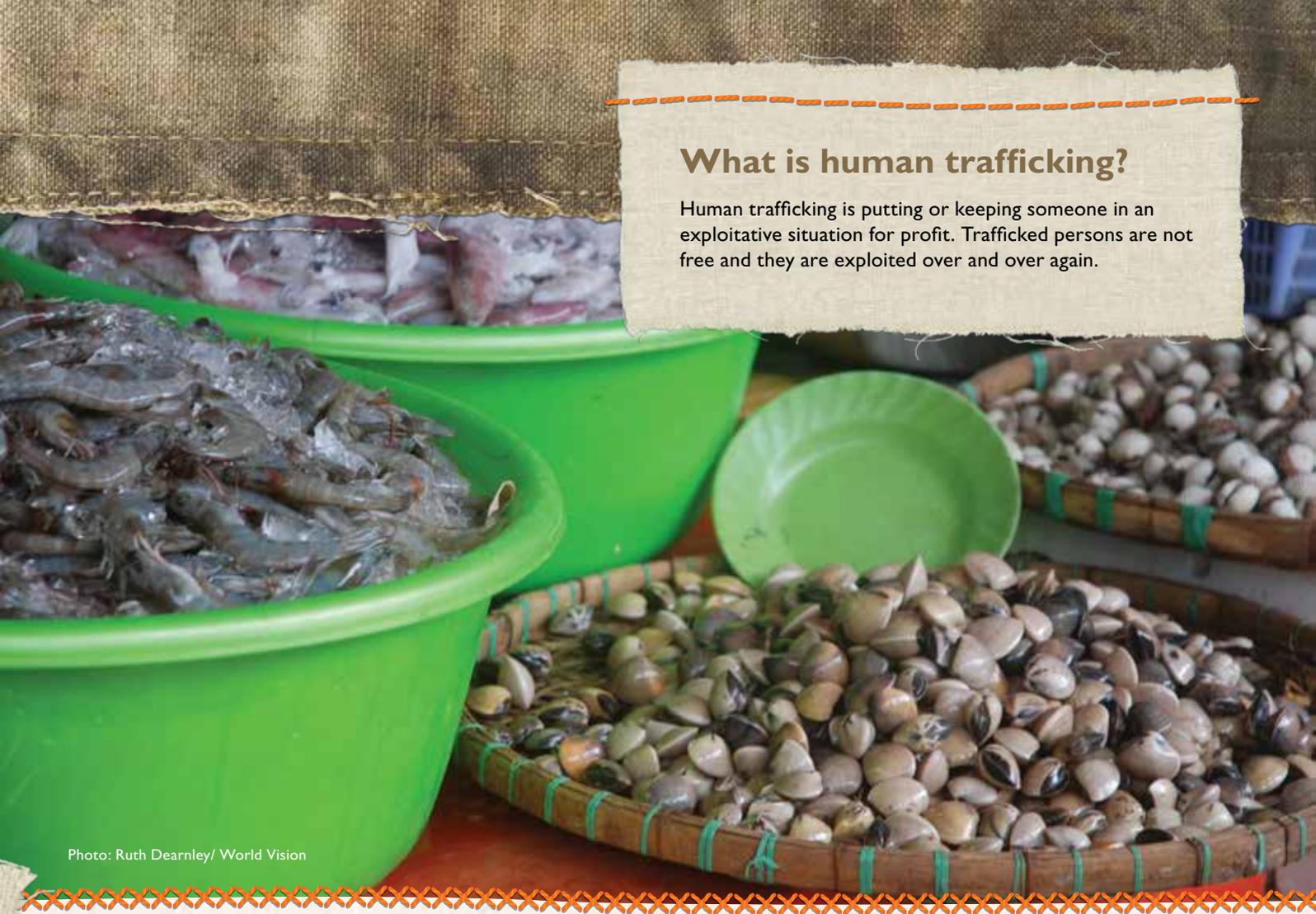


Photo: Ruth Dearnley/ World Vision

## What is human trafficking?

Human trafficking is putting or keeping someone in an exploitative situation for profit. Trafficked persons are not free and they are exploited over and over again.

# HELD CAPTIVE: HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN DEEP SEA FISHING

Labour shortages can create a great demand for cheap labour, which is often filled by poor migrants, including children. Many migrants from Cambodia and Myanmar are employed in the Thai fishing industry<sup>15</sup>. These migrant workers are targeted by labour brokers who promise decent wages and good conditions of work<sup>16</sup>. In reality, they are trafficked into life-threatening conditions on fishing boats.

These men are held captive by fishing boat captains, essentially as slaves. In some cases they may have been tricked into incurring debts with fraudulent interest rates from labour brokers, which then bind them indefinitely to the boat. If they attempt to escape, the captain may double or triple the debt, further securing their servitude<sup>17</sup>. When trapped hundreds of nautical miles from land aboard fishing trawlers<sup>18</sup>, for months and sometimes years, the chances of escape are extremely limited.

Deep sea fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations in the world<sup>19</sup>. For the men and boys working on Thai fishing boats, this is especially true<sup>20</sup>. So far from land, workers aboard deep sea fishing vessels are incredibly vulnerable to abuse. Workers face horrendous conditions, no pay and may suffer shocking acts of violence at the hands of boat captains<sup>21</sup>. Murder and torture is alarmingly commonplace<sup>22</sup>. Those who have managed to escape from boats report living

under constant threat of violence or death, providing eyewitness accounts of other crew members being beheaded, shot, stabbed, beaten and thrown overboard<sup>23,24</sup>. Risking death by jumping overboard is often the only chance to escape. Many men must continue working, despite serious injury, or they risk being thrown overboard<sup>25</sup>.

Crew members can work up to 20 hours per day and may be given amphetamines to keep working through the night<sup>26</sup>. They may also be exposed to harsh weather conditions, dangerous chemicals and pollution. In addition, they suffer malnutrition, starvation, exhaustion and dehydration<sup>27</sup>. Those operating fishing fleets use shuttle-boats to remove the need to return to land – providing fuel, supplies, picking up catches and providing new workers to smaller boats<sup>28</sup>. As a result, smaller vessels may be at sea for years at a time. Out of the eyes of scrutiny, these boats are able to maintain these horrific practices.

Severe labour shortages and decreasing profits from overfishing have also meant some boat captains have resorted to kidnapping people to work on fishing trawlers<sup>29</sup>. Reported methods of kidnapping include abduction at gun point, drugging of men in karaoke bars – even abduction of boys from public bathrooms using chloroform rags<sup>30</sup>.

# LABOUR EXPLOITATION IN SEAFOOD PROCESSING

Once fish is harvested, it often goes to peeling sheds and processing plants where men, women and children sort, peel and cut fish to be produced into chilled, frozen or preserved products<sup>31</sup>. Exploitative practices are all well documented, particularly in the major prawn producing countries of Thailand and Bangladesh<sup>32</sup>. In Thai peeling sheds, workers are reportedly exposed to harsh chemicals and ammonia, which burns their skin and causes serious respiratory illnesses<sup>33</sup>. Larger peeling sheds outsource work to unregistered sheds where women and their children – often migrants – work for low pay to keep labour costs down<sup>34</sup>. Children may be paid less than adult workers, and some are not paid at all.

Children may be involved in a variety of post harvest and processing activities including sorting, cleaning, drying, loading and unloading fish and peeling prawns<sup>35</sup>. Those who process prawns can suffer from arthritis, urinary tract infections, back injuries, repetitive strain, muscle inflammation, fungal infections

and diarrhoea<sup>36</sup>. They may also use dangerous equipment and machinery and perform repetitive tasks and heavy lifting<sup>37</sup>. In Bangladesh, children work long hours de-heading prawns. They toil without breaks, and are often cheated out of their pay<sup>38</sup>. They may receive cuts to their hands and feet, which can become infected, abscessed and swollen<sup>39</sup>.

Women and children working in Thai peeling sheds are also reportedly subject to shocking physical, sexual and emotional abuse<sup>40</sup>. Reports exist of employers shaming women and girls by cutting their hair, shaving patches of their head and stripping them naked and beating them in front of other workers<sup>41</sup>.

Many children working in peeling sheds do not attend school. They often come from low income households where the parents already work in the prawn harvesting industry. Without an education, these children have little opportunity of escaping this cycle of exploitation.

## WHERE DOES IT OCCUR?



1. Angola
2. Bangladesh
3. Cambodia
4. Côte d'Ivoire
5. Egypt

6. El Salvador
7. Gabon
8. Ghana
9. Guinea
10. India

11. Indonesia
12. Malawi
13. New Zealand
14. Pakistan
15. Philippines

16. Senegal
17. Sierra Leone
18. Thailand<sup>42,43,44</sup>

# SEAFOOD SUPPLY CHAIN

## Capture fishing:

Forced, child and trafficked labour is reported on deep sea fishing vessels.

## Aquaculture:

The farming of fish in man-made ponds is a growing industry. Exploitative labour practices are reported in the farming and harvesting of seafood in mass production fish farms. Children as young as eight are sometimes used for their cheap labour<sup>45</sup>.



## Wholesale market:

The seafood is then taken to markets where it is combined with the catch of other vessels. This is bought in bulk by seafood processors who will prepare the fish. Exploitative labour practices are commonly reported.



## Secondary processing:

Depending on the final seafood product, seafood may be further processed by cooking, smoking, breading or freezing.

## Primary processing:

This may involve pre-processing activities such as cleaning, sorting, cutting or shelling. Women and children are most commonly exploited for their labour at this stage.

## Exporters and importers:

The seafood is then sent to markets around the world.

## Distributors:

Products are then sold to wholesalers, food service companies and retailers.

## Retailers:

Retailers then purchase the final product from a wholesaler. Large retailers may purchase directly from an exporter. The product is then sold to consumers.



# WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Companies buying and selling seafood products have a responsibility to ensure they are not tainted by human rights abuses such as forced, child or trafficked labour.

Australian seafood retailers, manufacturers and importers must demonstrate what they are doing to address forced, child and trafficked labour in the seafood industry. They need to work with suppliers to improve standards, and demonstrate that adults and children were not harmed in the production of their goods.

Government action is also critical to address forced, child and trafficked labour in the seafood industry. Governments have a responsibility to take meaningful action against exploitative practices and human rights abuses. This should involve implementing policies and enforcing laws to protect people from being exploited by unscrupulous employers. Measures are needed to ensure companies operating within their borders uphold the highest human rights standards.

## What can you do?

What do you know about a seafood business' policies and practices? Educate yourself about where your purchases come from and ensure they do not contribute to forced, child or trafficked labour. Use the Ethical Shopping Guide<sup>46</sup> to help you choose seafood products from companies that uphold good corporate practices.



Photo: Ruth Dearnley/ World Vision

For more information visit  
**[donttradelives.com.au](http://donttradelives.com.au)**

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