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Open letter to seafood traders, processors and retailers who source tuna from Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean

**Call to stop sourcing tuna from Chinese vessels operating in the Indian Ocean
due to the prevalence of illegal fishing, human rights abuses and forced labour
associated with the fleet.**

Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, human rights abuses and forced labour are a blight on the seafood industry, causing untold damage to marine ecosystems and those who rely on them. China's distant-water fleet, which is by far the world's largest, has been repeatedly documented engaging in illicit and abusive activities at sea on a global scale - ranging from the industrial slaughter of marine wildlife to the violent abuse of vulnerable crew.

Recent Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) investigations have revealed the scale and severity of illegal fishing and human rights abuses on board China's fleet in the Indian Ocean, a region recognised as a marine biodiversity hotspot upon which millions of people rely for income and nutrition. A 2024 [report](#) and [film](#) by EJF documented the experiences of Indonesian and Filipino crew who had worked on 27 Chinese tuna longline vessels in the region. All 44 crew interviewed reported abusive working and living conditions, 96% reported working excessive overtime (often upwards of 18 hour days), 80% reported routine shark finning, and 55% physical violence. Four deaths were reported on board the fleet during this time, including one Indonesian man who is believed to have thrown himself overboard after his desperate pleas to return home were ignored.

EJF's [latest investigation in the Indian Ocean](#), along with coverage in outlets including [The New York Times](#), exposes the use of North Korean forced labour on board at least 12 tuna longliners. The report details forced labour of a gravity that exceeds much of that witnessed to date in the seafood industry, including allegations of North Koreans being trapped at sea for up to a decade. The use of North Korean labour is outlawed by United Nations Security Council sanctions and violates regulations in key seafood market states.

China is not only the world's largest distant water fleet but also a major exporter of fisheries products. Both of the above investigations have linked Chinese vessels suspected of illegal fishing, forced labour and human rights abuses in the Indian Ocean to key international markets, including the EU, the UK, the USA, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. Furthermore, several major global retailers have disclosed their links to tuna sourced from Chinese vessels in the Indian Ocean through the [Oceans Disclosure Project](#).

Given the high risk of tuna linked to these abuses entering global supply chains, we ask seafood companies in market states to:

1. Exclude tuna from Chinese vessels operating in the Indian Ocean. EJF urges companies to remove this high-risk fleet from their supply chains. This exclusion should remain until it has been evidenced that vessel owners have established effective due diligence and crew welfare mechanisms to verify that the catching vessels are free from abuse and IUU fishing. Guidance on how companies can assess and mitigate their risk of IUU fishing and abuse is available [here](#).
2. Advocate for systemic change across tuna supply chains. Leading companies can only implement their commitments to abuse-free and legal tuna if the vessels they source from comply with best practices. The private sector must use its leverage to encourage action from both company owners and governments throughout global supply chains.
3. Amplify collaborative efforts on fisheries transparency by publicly endorsing and encouraging the uptake of the [Global Charter for Fisheries Transparency](#). The Coalition for Fisheries Transparency's Charter identifies the most essential, cost-effective and realistically achievable policy priorities for combatting an industry-wide lack of transparency, a key enabler of illegal fishing and human rights abuses at sea.

By undertaking the above, seafood traders, processors, and retailers can play a vital role in addressing the abuses seen in the Indian Ocean and farther afield, helping to ensure that tuna fisheries are sustainable, legal and ethical.

Yours sincerely,



Steve Trent, CEO & Founder

Environmental Justice Foundation

Our work to secure environmental justice aims to protect our global climate, ocean, forests, wetlands, wildlife and defend the fundamental human right to a secure natural environment, recognising that all other rights are contingent on this. EJF works internationally to inform policy and drive systemic, durable reforms to protect our environment and defend human rights. We investigate and expose abuses and support environmental defenders, Indigenous peoples, communities, and independent journalists on the frontlines of environmental injustice. Our campaigns aim to secure peaceful, equitable and sustainable futures. Our investigators, researchers, filmmakers, and campaigners work with grassroots partners and environmental defenders across the globe.

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