

Fishers & Plunderers

The unpalatable truth behind the fish on your plate

Respected figures in the shipping community, Father Bruno Ciceri, Alastair Couper, and Hance D. Smith, have joined together to head a research project highlighting the plight of the fishing industry's workforce. Using evidence from the fishers themselves they have laid bare the unacceptable face of the global fishing industry. The results of this research have been published in an essential read: *Fishers and Plunderers: Theft, Slavery and Violence at Sea*.

Both Alastair and Hance have had close contact with the fishing industry since their childhoods. Alastair was brought up in North East Scotland, which had a high dependence on fishing, and Hance has a Shetland background; one of the key locations in the UK fishing industry, surrounded by some of Europe's richest fishing grounds.

Bruno meanwhile had little contact with the fishing industry as a child, but has been personally and closely involved with the issues for many years. He says: "For 13 years I was the Director of the Stella Maris International Service Center in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, a shelter providing assistance to migrant workers, seafarers and fishers. The Taiwan fishing industry plays an important role in the economy and many fishing companies are based in Kaohsiung. During my stay, I saw, first hand, the problems faced by the fishers. We have recorded many of my personal experiences working with the fishers in Kaohsiung.

"People at the Center needed assistance in dealing with a variety of problems including unpaid salary, compensation for accidents on board vessels, abuse and exploitation," says Bruno. "We helped them deal with these difficulties and counselled them through their struggles. Often, these people were brought into the country illegally. Many were uneducated and simply didn't know how to solve their problems. With the assistance of interpreters and lawyers, we

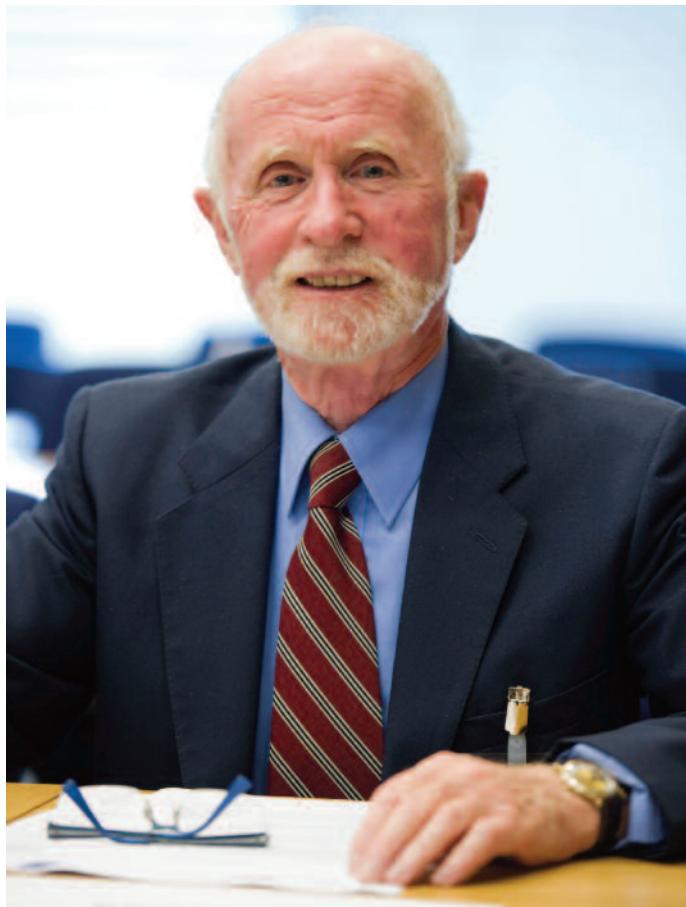
negotiated with authorities, fishing companies, brokers and agents to get them repatriated to their country of origin. Through my travels in Asia – Thailand, Philippines, and Indonesia – I spoke with many different volunteers and chaplains at the ports. I was able to collect stories right from the mouths of people deeply affected by the dark side of the industry. And I thought to myself, how has it taken so long for these stories to come to light?"

Joining the dots

Alastair explains that the problems have been around for a long time but no one has linked them together before. They are under-researched, he says. "We explored the whole system – the conditions for the fish stocks and the fishers, and the serious human rights issues that are being violated in the industry. It is important to realise that the decline in fish stocks, destruction of the marine environment, poverty in small communities and abuses of working at sea are not single entities. They are components of a system based on unregulated competition for scarce marine resources.

"These are generally overfished, stolen from poorer coastal zones with employment of low cost labour trafficked from poorest countries, with disregard for welfare and high risks. The system needs to be understood in this holistic way," he says.





Alastair Couper

Systemic criminality

The researchers were surprised by the sheer scale of illegal fishing activities in the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of developing countries and in the open oceans beyond state jurisdiction. "What emerged most strongly for me was the realisation of the systemic criminality in the global supply chains," says Alastair. "These were controlled by hidden owners, engaged in illegal fishing, fraudulent records, bribery and corruption at commercial and government levels. We even saw the prosecution of fishers for the crimes of their employers.

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"It is well organised at a high level, driven by greed from criminal organisations. It has been tolerated for too long, to a point that it has become deemed as normal through general acceptance. Since deregulation, movement of labour between countries is influenced by the different motives of many unknown groups," said Alastair. "It's difficult to



penetrate who is really behind it but we are pleased to say that the information we have found is helping the police build on their investigations."

Support across the board

Of course a project of this nature and the resulting outputs are controversial. The team has the support of the fishers and trade unions, and backing from human rights organisations and environmental groups like Greenpeace and the Environmental Justice Foundation who have also contributed material – but what about big organisations? Hance is upbeat about this: "It is fair to say that large sections of both the commercial fishing industry, together with many artisanal fishers in developing countries are very much against illegal fishing and associated trade, and they are likely to react positively to our work because it supports properly managed fisheries through highlighting the widespread illegal activities."

The team hope that the results of the project will not only raise awareness of the problems in fisheries amongst the general public, but most importantly, encourage cooperation between the governments, NGOs and consumers to pressure the industry to change and clean up its act. They have collected the evidence required by policy makers to strengthen regulations top down, and to encourage trade unions, NGOs, academics, lawyers and especially commercial buyers of fish to provide bottom up pressures to preserve stocks and further human rights.



Father Bruno Ciceri

Improving the situation

The project has also identified what needs to be done to better protect fishers. Alastair explains: "In the case of small scale fishing communities there needs to be a re-examining of the rights of access by coastal people to the EEZs as a priority right. In the case of distant water fishing the ratification and implementation of the ILO Work in Fishing Convention 188 is essential. It is necessary also to demand further information requirements on deaths of fishers, prosecution of fishers and legal representation and fair trials when they are arrested for the crimes of their employers and governments."

Hance adds that there are a number of dimensions to this: "There is a need to strengthen international measures concerned with IUU fishing," he says. "The existing fisheries management systems at national level also need to be made more effective. Right now, the priority remains to save the fish, but by focusing on the fishers too, the industry itself will become more stable, and more sustainable economically, which it often isn't at the moment in many parts of the world. Fishers are at the sharp end of illegal activities, often as victims both at sea and in the fishing ports. When they are in real trouble at regional and national levels - when their boats are arrested – they need immediate support. Many are made virtually homeless. Whilst there have always been charities dealing with these issues, governments at national and



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Governments also need to implement the many legislations and regulations that are already in place, says Bruno. "The ILO Convention 188 needs to be ratified and implemented and in addition NGOs acting at grass roots level need to verify the implementation of those regulations and Conventions. Organisations such as Greenpeace, which are primarily concerned with the environmental and fishing issues, should also check on the human and working conditions of fishers. It has been proven that where there are criminal violations on the illegal catching of fish, there is also abuse of people. Collaboration among the NGOs involved in fishing really could have a big impact and bring improvements to the whole of the industry."

Future tasks

So what next? Alastair believes that there is further work needed. "We need to research more and gather more information. We need statistics, for example, on the number of deaths amongst fishers. We only know estimates of seafarer deaths and we fear these figures are actually much,

much worse than we've been told. We also want more statistics on arrests at sea." Many seafarers are arrested for crimes they don't commit without going to trial, he says. "We don't know the full extent to which this is happening and need to find out more. We have identified the problems but we still have a lot to do to raise awareness and find solutions to these problems."

Bruno agrees that these messages need to be passed to everyone in the industry as well as the consumers – to the big companies, governments and importers. They must start checking their supply chain to look for trafficking, forced labour and violence on their shipping vessels. "Seafood is imported everywhere," he says. "The US imports 90% of all seafood consumed. With numbers like that, there is a good chance that the seafood you eat will have been imported by people at sea who are suffering abuse or violation in order to bring that to your plate."

Adds Alastair: "No one ever asks about the fishers – it's about time they did."

This article has been written from an interview with Father Bruno Ciceri, Alastair Couper, and Hance D. Smith. For a full transcript of the interview please visit http://seafarersrights.org/fishers-interviews-flip/SRI_fishers_plunders_book_interviews.html