



12 October 2024

## **Does ‘naming and shaming’ work? The case of US tuna industry**

### **Measuring environmental and human rights performance of retail corporations**

In recent decades, civil society and non-governmental organisations (CSO/NGO) have increasingly resorted to ‘naming and shaming’ as a technique to improve corporate treatment of human rights and environmentally impacting practices.

In recent years, in reaction of these useful and independent endeavours that affect consumer awareness and behaviour, private corporations, often encouraged by governments, launched a private certification business aimed at projecting a positive image of the corporate sector from environmental, social and governance (ESG) perspective [\[read\]](#).

Results of ‘naming and shaming’ have been at best mixed and in some cases stigmatising has even turned out to be counterproductive [\[read\]](#). Regarding ESG certification, it has frequently been qualified as greenwashing [\[read\]](#).

In the US, Greenpeace has been monitoring major retail corporations’ performance for seafood from the point of view of environmental sustainability since 2008 by publishing successive Carting Away the Oceans reports.

From 2021 onwards, the NGO released specific analyses of the US tuna industry. The last of these pieces, ‘The high cost of cheap tuna’ [\[read\]](#), shows that the environmental and human rights performance of most retail corporations is far below standard.

Out of the 16 corporations monitored, only 2 obtained the passing score of more than 60% for the Greenpeace indicator<sup>1</sup>, while 8 scored below 30%.

---

<sup>1</sup> The indicator used by Greenpeace is computed on the basis of answers to 39 questions. The weights of domains in the indicator are as follows: Tuna procurement policy (20%), Traceability (20%), Advocacy and initiatives (10%), Human rights and labour protection (25%), Current sourcing (20%) and Customer education and labelling (5%).



### What do these scores mean in concrete terms?

The US is one of the main tuna consuming countries. US retail corporations have the power to shape the global tuna industry, including the human rights outcomes of tens of thousands of persons working in the global tuna supply chain.

The seafood sector is known to treat badly its workers. It is estimated that approximately 128,000 fishers are trapped in forced labour [\[read\]](#). They are sometimes stranded in the sea for months and their rights are violated repeatedly. At the same time, they are often enrolled in illegal fishing activities that contribute to overfishing [\[read p. 6\]](#)

It is interesting to note that performance for environmental sustainability is somewhat more encouraging than for human rights.

For sustainability, 5 retailers out of 16 received a score of more than 50%. For human rights, only 1 retailer achieved more than 50%, demonstrating that this aspect is neglected by corporations. This can probably be explained by the fact that consumers are more concerned by environmental issues that are more visible in the media. Violation of human rights is usually associated with crisis (particularly conflict) situations, and only rarely with 'normal' conditions.

In fisheries, however, human rights violation is virtually a 'normal' circumstances. Victims are mostly originating from poor countries, many from Asia (e.g. The Philippines). In recent times, the horrid working conditions of sea workers were only extensively raised during the COVID-19 pandemic, with reference to crews

left alone on ships off major ports in an intolerable situation, on the margin of survival.

Greenpeace notes that ‘[there are signs of progress and improvements for some retailers](#)’ but that in many cases, a significant gap remains between corporate performance observed and stated corporate policies.

Improvements identified by the NGO include the possibility for workers to be in contact with their families through wifi connections, phasing out of transshipments<sup>2</sup> or adoption of methods of fishing that reduce bycatch.

Retail corporations are also progressively making explicit statements on sustainability and human rights in their procurement policies, but the gap between what is written and what happens in reality is rather large, particularly for the worse performers who are yet far from aligning on internationally recognised frameworks such as the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights [\[read\]](#). In particular, workers do not have a safe and anonymous mechanism through which they can complain about human rights issues. Nor do they, in many cases, have the right to organise in proper trade unions.

## Conclusion

‘Naming and shaming’ may improve somewhat the practice of corporations. Conscious of the importance of their image they project in the eyes of consumers, companies may progressively – but slowly – correct their mode of operation.

As an international zone, where governments have little control, the sea is, as yet, some kind of a ‘wild territory’, where laws and norms are not applied in a satisfactory manner.

Unless there are clear laws and norms, and effective ways of enforcing them, unsustainable fishing and unbearable living conditions for workers will perpetuate in the future.

---

To know more:

- Fritzner, C. et al. (ed.), [The High Cost of Cheap Tuna – US Supermarkets, Sustainability, and Human Rights at Sea](#), Greenpeace USA, Washington DC, 2024.
- United Nations, [Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#), 2011.

---

<sup>2</sup> Transshipment is when the catch is transferred from one ship to another, allowing the fishing vessel to remain at sea longer.

Selection of past articles on [hungerexplained](#) related to the topic:

- [Fisheries: Can the world face a growing demand for fish while stocks are being depleted and environmental degradation accelerates?](#) 2022.
- [Responsible businesses or greenwashing? The certification industry in support of multinationals](#), 2021.

As well as articles grouped under the theme '[Multinationals and their image](#)'.