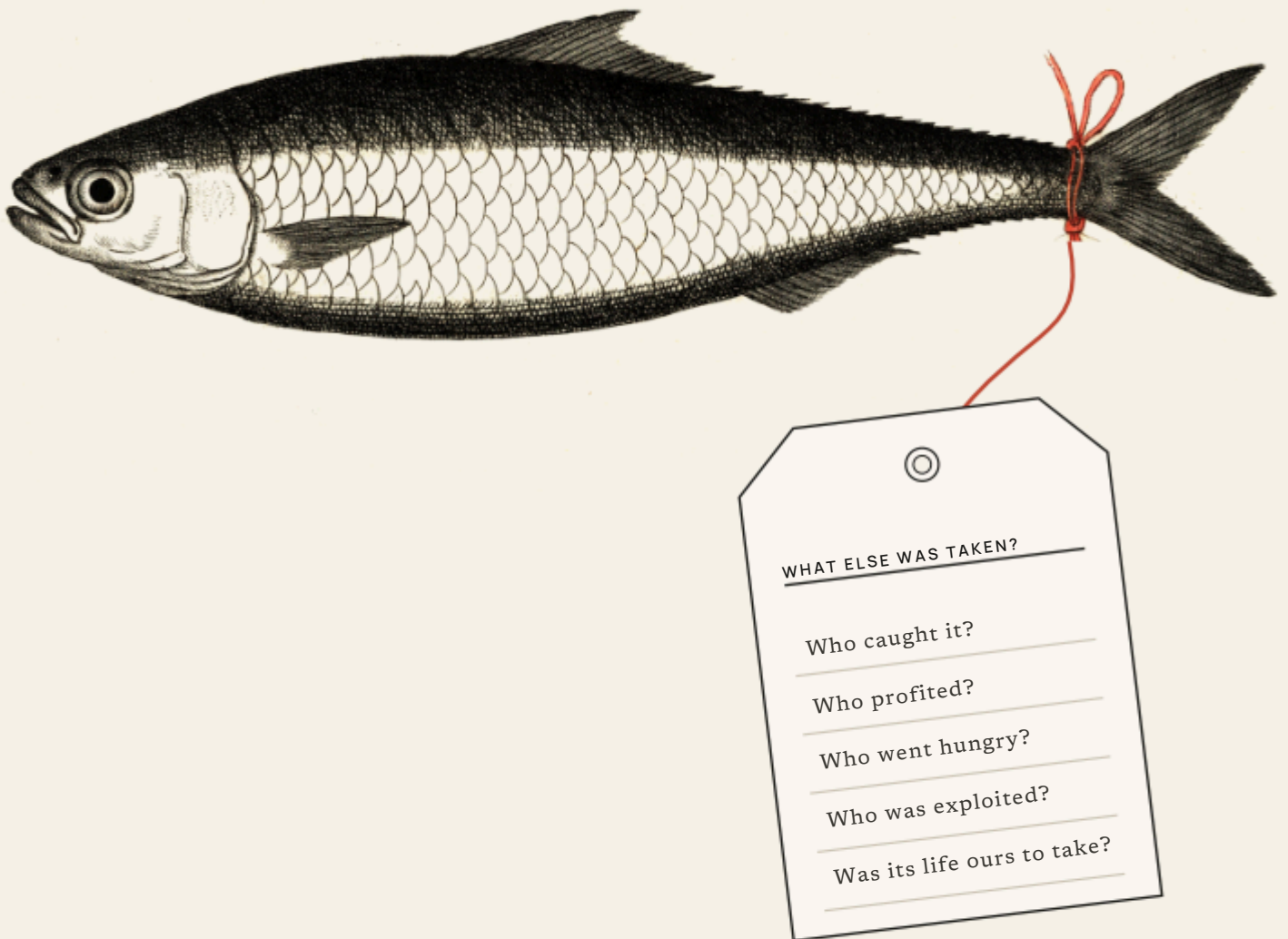


The Moral Catch

Fisheries, Justice, and the Living Ocean

Summary Report



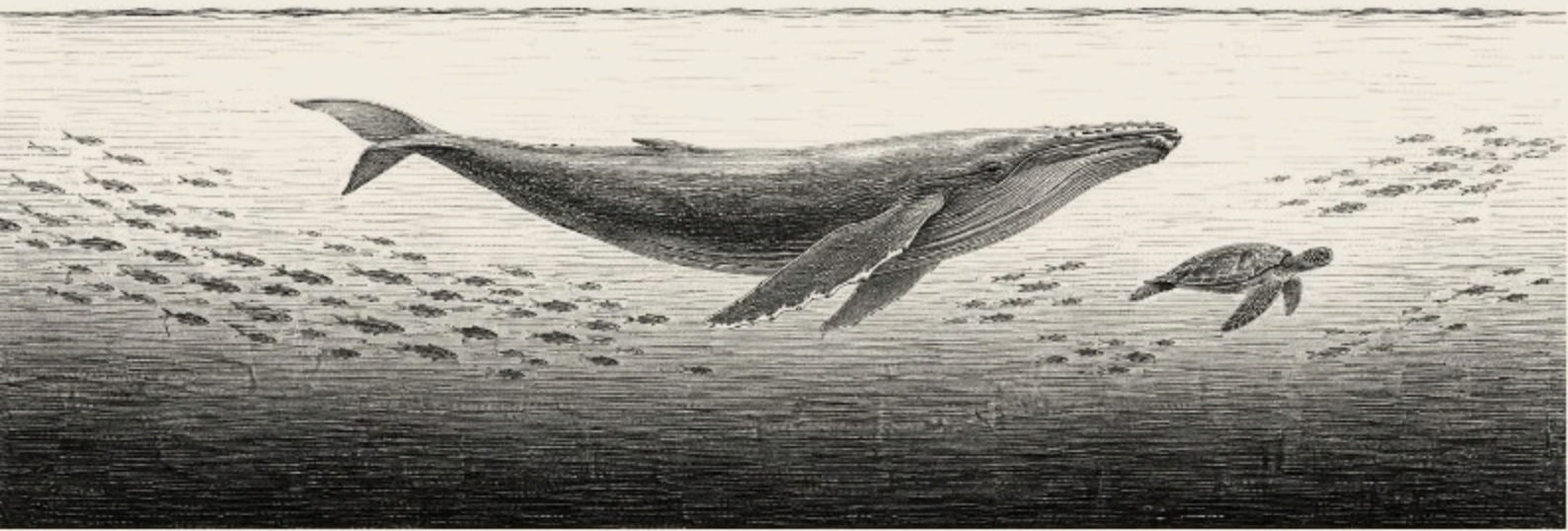
Before it's a resource, the Ocean is a community of life.



**When an offer sounds too good to be true, we ask:
what's the catch?**

Fishing gives the phrase another meaning. A catch is the fish brought from the water, but it can also contain costs, consequences and harms that become harder to see once that fish enters a market.

Behind a piece of seafood may be a worker carrying recruitment debt, a community losing access to fish it has long depended on, or damage to the habitat that made the catch possible. Before any of this, the fish was alive within an ecosystem: feeding, moving, reproducing and responding to its surroundings.



Is there a moral catch in the way the world fishes?

This report is an exploration of this question.



Labour • Power • Habitat • Values • Rights • Risks • Responsibility

These parts of the story are usually examined separately.

Fisheries science asks whether a population can sustain fishing pressure. Labour systems examine work and safety. Food policy follows access and nutrition. Conservation looks at habitats and species. Each reveals something important, but no single view contains the whole catch.

Can a system be defended on moral grounds when it diverts edible fish from people facing hunger, traps workers in jobs they cannot safely leave, and allows women's access to fish and markets to become tied to sexual pressure or coercion?

And can it be called responsible when it treats fish as though their lives and suffering do not matter, while taking from the ocean faster than fish populations and habitats can recover?

What, then, makes a catch moral?

What does a moral relationship with the ocean, and with all the lives within it, require?

Moral Provocations: report in brief

A healthy stock can still hide an unjust fishery

In 2023, 62.4 per cent of the marine stocks assessed by FAO were within biologically sustainable limits. That tells us whether fishing pressure can be sustained, but not whether workers were free, families could afford the fish, habitats were damaged, or animals suffered during capture. Stock health matters, but it cannot tell the whole moral story.

Forced labour, coercion and exploitation run through the seafood economy

The ILO's 2021 global estimate placed about 128,000 fishers in forced labour, and the true number may be higher. Recruitment debt, withheld wages and long periods offshore can trap workers in jobs they cannot safely leave. Women's access to fish has also been linked to sexual pressure or coercion, while hazardous child labour, forced child labour and trafficking have been documented.

Edible fish can be caught while hunger remains at home

Average aquatic-food availability in 2023 was 21.1 kilograms per person globally, but only 9.1 kilograms in Africa. In Northwest Africa, whole edible sardinella and other small pelagic fish can be turned into feed for aquaculture elsewhere, even as local processors and households face less fish and higher prices. Where the food goes matters as much as how much is produced.

Conservation can protect nature and still dispossess people

A closure or protected area may be necessary for ecological recovery, yet people who have depended on those waters for generations can lose access without secure rights or support. Customary and Indigenous fishing rights do not become less important because conservation is urgent. Recovery should protect the living world without making those least responsible for its decline carry the heaviest cost.

Public money can keep harmful industrial fishing power at sea

Capacity-enhancing fisheries subsidies were estimated at US\$22.2 billion in 2018, lowering costs and expanding fishing capacity. Industrial fleets backed by owners, buyers, finance and public money can operate at a scale far beyond that of small-scale fishers. The harms are not produced evenly, and responsibility should reflect that.

Before it was catch, it was alive

A stock is a population of living animals within an ecosystem. Stock assessments tell us whether that population can endure fishing pressure, but not what an individual fish experiences during capture and killing, what happens to bycaught animals, or whether damaged habitat can recover. The life of the fish does not disappear when it becomes a product.

Power decides who can change what happens next

Governments control access and enforcement. Owners shape working conditions. Buyers influence prices and standards, while banks and insurers make vessels, farms and factories possible. Workers, women processors, fishers and coastal communities also organize and resist, but they do not hold the same power over licences, contracts and capital. Where forced labour, hazardous child labour, extinction risk or severe irreversible ecological harm is established, better management is not enough. Some practices must stop.

Faith, dignity and justice

Ulfat Hussein Masibo
Africa Muslim Women Action
Network (AMWAN)
Islamic reflection

“The ocean is part of our amanah, a trust given to us.”

Rabbi Ed Rosenthal
Repair the Sea - Tikkun HaYam
Jewish reflection

“It’s time to stop looking at the Ocean as a resource, and begin to see it as The Source.”

Rudelmar Bueno de Faria
ACT Alliance

“As the moral catch reminds us, a healthy fish stock cannot compensate for forced labour, and economic revenue cannot justify irreversible harm to habitats or communities.”



Restraint, life and future generations

Sujatha Kotamraju
Hindu Council of Kenya
Hindu reflection

“Bringing a moral voice to fisheries means declaring that policy and economics are insufficient on their own. “

Shoukei Matsumoto
Living Dharma Centre /
Musashino University
Buddhist reflection

“Restraint without repair would be abandonment; what the grasp has taken must also be returned.”

Yukiko Yamada Morovic
World Vision International

“Perhaps the true measure of responsible fisheries is not simply what we take from the ocean, but what we leave behind.”



The ocean is not a warehouse.

“To heal the waters, we must first heal the human heart, replacing greed with gratitude and exploitation with devotion.”

Sujatha Kotamraju
Hindu Council of Kenya



Six conditions of a Moral Catch

Faiths for Oceans uses five ethical roots to organize our inquiry: dignity, sufficiency, the commons, agency, and kinship and reciprocity. They arise through different faith traditions and histories and also connect with human-rights law, environmental ethics and democratic practice. This framework does not claim that every tradition reaches the same conclusion.

The six conditions below follow consequences across five scales: the individual; household and community; supply chain and economy; population, species, habitat and living system; and future generations.

⦿ Protect

freedom, safety and living systems

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Does the system protect people from coercion, violence, preventable injury, illness and death, and does it protect animals and ecological systems from avoidable suffering and destruction?

Protection begins with the simple conviction that no life should be treated as expendable. It asks whether workers can enter and leave their jobs freely, whether children and women are safe from coercion, and whether fish and the waters that sustain them are protected from avoidable harm. It also looks at bycatch, discards, disease, escapes, animal welfare and the growing risks of a changing climate.

⦿ Nourish

food, livelihoods and a fair share

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Does the system distribute nourishment, income and security fairly, especially where diets and livelihoods depend on the water?

Nourish begins with the question of who is fed, who earns, and who is left carrying the cost. A large catch can still leave nearby families unable to afford fish, while a closure needed for ecological recovery can push a low-income household into debt when support comes too late. It asks whether food and livelihoods are protected alongside the health of the water.

⦿ Reconcile

rights, power and conflict

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Are decisions and conflicts governed through legitimate authority, meaningful participation, secure rights, shared knowledge and non-violence?

Reconcile asks who has the power to make decisions, whose rights are recognized, and whether the people most affected can challenge what is decided. It looks at whether workers, fishers, women, Indigenous peoples and coastal communities have a real voice when access, conservation rules or livelihoods are at stake, and whether conflict is handled fairly and without violence.

⦿ Restore

ecological and social repair

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Can depleted stocks, damaged habitats and harmed people recover, with costs carried by actors according to responsibility and capacity?

Restore asks what recovery should look like after harm. A depleted population may need time and protection to rebuild. A damaged habitat may need years of repair. People may still be owed wages, health care or the right to return to fishing grounds they once depended on.

Ending the harmful practice stops new damage. It does not repair what has already been lost. Recovery should leave the fishery, and the people who carried the cost of rebuilding it, in a better position than before.

⦿ Source

truth, ownership and accountability

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Can decision-makers verify origin, ownership, labour conditions, methods, impacts and finance, and can affected people challenge inaccurate information and obtain remedy?

Source asks whether a fish can be followed far enough to see who caught or farmed it, who owns the operation, how workers were treated, and what happened when harm occurred. A label may name the species and origin while leaving the worker, recruiter, owner or financier invisible. Traceability matters when it carries responsibility along with the product.

⊙ Abstain

the limit of reform

Has harm become extreme, irreversible, unnecessary or persistently beyond reliable control?

STOP CONDITIONS

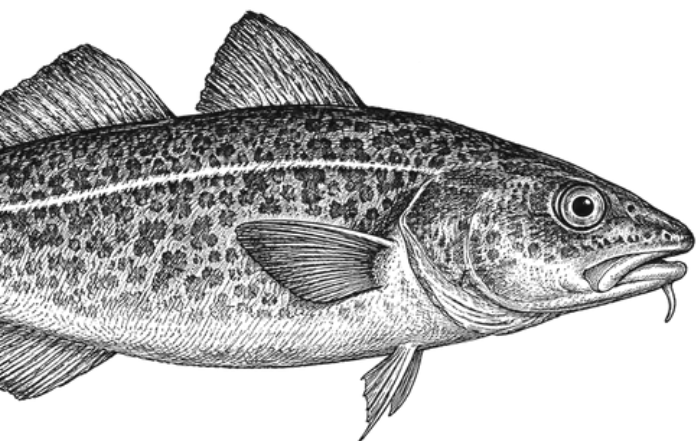
- Forced labour
- Hazardous child labour
- Sexual coercion
- Systematic violence
- Bribery that disables protection
- Knowing use of a practice likely to cause extinction
- Significant adverse impact on a vulnerable marine ecosystem that cannot be prevented
- Other severe or irreversible habitat harm

Abstain asks when the most moral choice is not to take at all. Some harms should not be managed, offset or averaged against benefits. The stop conditions alongside require an immediate stop.

New or previously untrawled areas should not be opened to bottom trawling. Whole edible fish should not be diverted into feed where people nearby are struggling to eat and the harm cannot be justified.

Abstention also keeps the taking of animal life itself in view. Faith traditions reach different conclusions about killing and eating fish; the framework does not impose a single religious rule. Where people have abundant alternatives, choosing not to consume seafood can be a serious moral position. Sometimes restraint means taking less. Sometimes it means leaving the fish in the water.

Stopping further harm does not repair what has already been lost. Remedy remains owed, and transition finance must protect people whose livelihoods depend on the activity. Families should not be pushed into debt while waiting for help. As harm becomes more severe, irreversible or avoidable, owners, buyers, financiers and public authorities seeking to continue should have to show why the activity remains defensible.

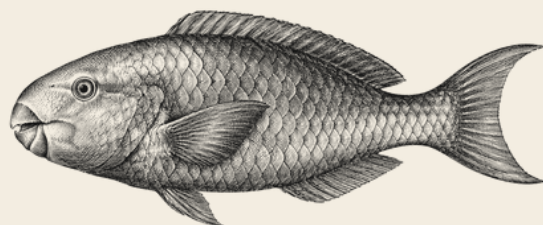


WHAT YOUR FAITH INSTITUTION CAN DO

Make a commitment

Faith institutions buy seafood, invest money, fund conservation, teach and speak in public. Each of these choices reaches the water.

The Faiths High Ambition Coalition for Ocean and Nature Action brings faith bodies together to act on them and to report what changes.



Review

Choose one seafood, investment or grant relationship and test it against the six conditions, using the Faith Fisheries Toolkit.

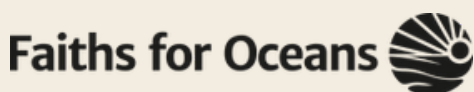
Decide

State whether to continue, improve, pause or stop, and what repair is owed.

Commit

Register your institution's commitments with the Coalition and report back on what changed.

www.oceans.faith/ambition



FAITHS HIGH
AMBITION
COALITION

Scan to register a
commitment or
report back.

www.oceans.faith/ambition