



Anthony Shadid Award for Journalism Ethics 2016 Award Entree Seafood From Slaves

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Link to series online: www.ap.org/explore/seafood-from-slaves/

The discovery of a slave island in Southeast Asia and the freedom, ultimately, of 2,000 men was sparked by a simple question: Where was the outrage?

Horrific labor abuses in Thailand's \$7 billion annual seafood industry had long been an open secret. Over the years, fishermen who managed to escape described being kidnapped, tricked or sold onto long-haul trawlers and taken to faraway waters. They worked every day, sometimes 22 or 24 hours at a time. Those who tried to rest were beaten with iron rods or the tails of stingrays. Some men were locked up, others killed, their bodies thrown overboard or dumped in the boat's fish freezer. But despite reports by human rights groups and admonition by foreign governments, including the U.S., the problem persisted.

We decided the best way to make the world take notice would be to find captive slaves and follow their catch to the American dinner table. Then, we hoped, companies benefiting could no longer deny culpability and consumers might push for change. Cracking the huge, murky underworld turned out to be harder than expected. Police and local officials were highly complicit, even profiting from the human trafficking trade. Documents were regularly falsified. Fishing boats were at sea for months at a time, off-loading their catch onto refrigerated cargo ships without any oversight. Tainted and clean seafood also mixed together at public auctions.

After a year of digging, however, we found ourselves on a wooden ferry heading to a remote island in eastern Indonesia, unreachable part of the year because of stormy seas. There, the AP discovered hundreds of slaves from Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, some locked in a cage, others buried under fake names in a company cemetery.

This was where our year-long series began. We never imagined how far it would go.

Conflicting values encountered in reporting the story.

The level of desperation in the island village of Benjina was staggering. Most fishermen had been away for years, even decades, with no way to reach their families. Many had lost hope of ever returning home. At least two had reportedly committed suicide. So when the men realized we were journalists, there to tell their stories to the outside world, they could not wait to talk. And they did so at great personal risk, using their real names and speaking on camera even when their abusers were right around the corner. We knew their testimony could help save them and _ potentially _ lead to reforms in the Thai seafood industry that enslaved tens of thousands of others. We also understood the risks. Trapped on the tiny, remote island, those who dared speak out faced possible beatings, torture, or worse, death. We wanted to honor the men's bravery, but we also felt it was our duty to protect them, even if they no longer cared to protect themselves.

The options considered to resolve the conflict.

The first option was to strip the names of men quoted in the story and to use only the footage that did not show their faces. The other, rather unconventional move, would be to rescue all those identified from Benjina before the report ran. We realized we would be inserting ourselves into the story by doing so, potentially crossing journalistic ethical lines. But we saw it as a way to maximize potential impact of an already powerful story and raised the idea with AP management in New York just in case. Even we were surprised: The decision was unanimous. Find a way to get the men to safety, then publish.

The dilemma was exacerbated by the competitiveness of the story. With each week that passed, we risked losing exclusivity, especially as Thai media got wind of Benjina and started moving in.

The final decision and the rationale for making it.

We decided to find a way to rescue the men. We wanted the strongest quotes and the best video. This included the cage shot, captive slaves calling out over the side of their trawler, and an interview with a man who helped bury a fellow fisherman in a jungle-covered company graveyard.

We reached out to a Jakarta-based source with the International Organization for Migration, the same man who had initially alerted us to the presence of stranded Southeast Asian fisherman on islands dotting eastern Indonesia. When the source saw the video of Kyaw Naing, the slave who spoke to The AP through the bars of the company cage, he immediately understood the importance of getting the story out. He contacted local marine police. Armed with the names and pictures of the most vulnerable men, authorities weathered rough seas to get to Benjina and brought "our" eight men to another island. By that time, we had linked the slave-caught fish to some of America's biggest supermarket chains and retailers, including Kroger and Walmart, and were ready to go public.

The series that followed freed thousands. A dozen people have been jailed, ships worth millions of dollars seized and businesses shut down. There have been Congressional hearings, lawsuits and proposed changes to legislation. Some of the world's largest companies, after being called out, have vowed to clean up supply chains.

In 2015, there is some understanding of human trafficking. But it was those images of men in a cage that finally is bringing about change.

A Final Note: Several of the reporters on this team had the incredible opportunity to work with Anthony Shadid. He was an inspiration, brilliant, balanced, kind and warm. He was a patient, funny and persistent colleague and editor who made all of us better journalists and people. We strive to live up to his high standards and we miss him always.