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[Girls/Boys](#)

How Protecting Wildlife Helps Stop Child Labor And Slavery

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A child grabs sleep after a long day of labor in a struggling West African fishery.

Courtesy of Jessica Pociask, WANT Expeditions

When scientists talk about the destruction of rain forests or the acidification of oceans, we often hear about the tragic loss of plants and animals.

But ecologists at the University of California, Berkeley say there's also a human tragedy that frequently goes unnoticed: As fish and fauna are wiped out, more children around the world are forced to work, and more people are forced into indentured servitude, scientists [wrote](#) Thursday in the journal *Science*.

Child labor and slavery is exploding because the time needed to catch fish [or hunt animals] has gone up exponentially.

- Ecologist Justin Brashares of the University of California, Berkeley

"My students, postdocs and I spent a year stepping back and trying to connect the dots between wildlife decline and human exploitation," says ecologist [Justin Brashares](#), who led the study. "We found about 50 examples around the world."

One of those examples made international headlines in June when the *Guardian* published a report about slavery in the Thai shrimping industry.

"Large numbers of men bought and sold like animals and held against their will on fishing boats off Thailand are integral to the production of prawns," the British newspaper [reported](#). These shrimp are "sold in leading supermarkets around the world, including the top four global retailers: Walmart, Carrefour, Costco and Tesco," the report said.

The world's food supply, both here in the U.S. and abroad, is increasingly connected to child labor and human trafficking, Brashares says. And the problems aren't just in the fishing industry or large supply chains that stock megagrocery stores. Many of the world's poorest people are turning to exploitative labor practices to earn a living and feed their families as traditional sources of food disappear.

[Why Slave Labor Still Plagues The Global Food System](#)

Wild animals, both on land and in the sea, provide incomes for about 15 percent of the world's population, Brashares and his team wrote. These animals are also the main source of protein for many of these people.

"We have more than 1 billion people on our planet whose livelihood and survival is tied to rapidly declining resources," Brashares says. "They're not going to take it lying down, nor should they."

As the fish in the ocean decline and forests are destroyed, families have to work harder and harder to get the same nutrition or wages. For instance, many communities in West Africa have hunted animals in local forests for thousands of years. Because of deforestation, now many hunters there must travel for days to find prey, Brashares and his team wrote in *Science*.

To make up for these extra costs, hunters and fishermen around the world have increasingly turned to cheaper labor. In many cases that ends up being children or people in desperate situations.

[Parallels](#)

[Thai Fishing Sector, Among World's Largest, Cited For Abuses](#)

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But many policies and laws aimed at stopping these abuses focus on stopping traffickers instead of trying to fix the source of the problem, he says. "The government's strategy of tracking down key traffickers and arresting them is missing the scale of the problem and the underlying issues driving them: the rapid destruction of wildlife."

Brashares thinks biologists need to work together with politicians, economists and social scientists to figure out ways to slow down the destruction of the environment. At the same time, communities that depend on local wildlife for food and income should have the rights to these natural resources, he says.

"We need to target areas where we know reliance on wildlife is the largest," Brashares says. "Then local communities need to have tenure rights to these animals. This strategy may be working against the U.S. economically in the short term, but in the long term, it's a no-brainer for the world."