

## **Breaking the Chains: The Seafood Sector's Role in the Fight Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking**

On June 26, the world unites for the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, a United Nations observance dedicated to raising awareness, strengthening action, and fostering cooperation to combat the global scourge of drug abuse and illicit trafficking. For seafood consumers and industry stakeholders, this day is more than a call to action—it is a stark reminder of the interconnectedness between the seafood we enjoy, and the broader challenges posed by the illegal drug trade.

### **The Hidden Currents: How Drug Trafficking Impacts Seafood**

While most consumers think of seafood as a healthy and sustainable protein source, few realize that the global seafood supply chain is increasingly entangled with the world of illicit drugs. Recent research reveals that the use of fishing vessels in drug trafficking has tripled over the past decade, now accounting for an estimated 15% of the global retail value of illicit drug. Small-scale artisanal fishers and coastal communities are particularly vulnerable, often drawn into trafficking networks due to economic hardship or lack of alternatives.

In some regions, organized crime groups have infiltrated fisheries, dictating harvests, prices, and even paying fishers in drugs instead of cash—a practice with disastrous public health consequences. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these vulnerabilities, disrupted land routes and pushed traffickers to exploit maritime pathways, further entangling the fishing sector in criminal activity.

### **Environmental and Health Consequences**

The impact of drug abuse and trafficking extends far beyond human health and law enforcement – it also threatens marine ecosystems and seafood safety. Drugs consumed by humans often end up in wastewater, which is not routinely filtered for pharmaceutical residues. These substances, including stimulants like methamphetamine, make their way into rivers and coastal waters, affecting the behavior and health of fish and other aquatic life.

Studies have shown that fish exposed to even low concentrations of illicit drugs can exhibit altered behaviours, potentially disrupting entire ecosystems. Moreover, pharmaceuticals and other contaminants can accumulate in seafood species, raising concerns about long-term health risks for consumers. While current studies suggest that the levels of pharmaceuticals in seafood are generally below thresholds of concern, the presence of prohibited substances like chloramphenicol in edible fish highlights the need for ongoing vigilance and improved wastewater management.

## Food Safety and Consumer Protection

The infiltration of illicit drugs into the seafood sector is not limited to trafficking alone. Food safety authorities regularly refuse shipments of imported seafood due to the detection of illegal veterinary drugs, underscoring the importance of robust monitoring and regulatory enforcement. In some high-profile cases, organized crime rings have exploited workers and falsified safety documents to sell contaminated shellfish, posing serious public health risks.

For consumers, these revelations highlight the importance of supporting transparent, traceable, and responsibly sourced seafood. Regulatory bodies such as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and international agencies are ramping up efforts to detect and prevent the use of unapproved drugs in aquaculture and wild-caught seafood, but the challenge remains significant.

## Building Resilience: Prevention, Education, and Community Action

The theme for the 2025 International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, “Breaking the Chains: Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery for All!”, emphasizes the need for united, health-based approaches to drug policy. For the seafood sector, this means:

- **Supporting sustainable livelihoods:** Investing in alternative income opportunities for fishing communities reduces the economic pressures that drive participation in trafficking networks.
- **Promoting education and awareness:** Empowering fishers, processors, and consumers with knowledge about the risks of drug trafficking and the importance of food safety can

foster a culture of compliance and resilience. Also eating seafood is great nourishment for the brain and heart!

- **Strengthening regulatory frameworks:** Ensuring rigorous monitoring, traceability, and enforcement in seafood supply chains helps protect both consumers and honest producers from the risks associated with illicit drugs.
- **Encouraging community involvement:** Civil society, industry associations, and local leaders all have a role to play in advocating for ethical practices and supporting those affected by drug abuse and trafficking.

## The Power of Informed Consumers

As seafood consumers, we have the power to drive change through our choices. By seeking out traceable, and responsibly sourced seafood, we can support fishers and producers who adhere to ethical and legal standards. Asking questions about where and how seafood is caught or farmed, and supporting brands and retailers committed to transparency, helps build a safer, more sustainable seafood sector.

## Conclusion: United for a Healthier Future

The fight against drug abuse and illicit trafficking is a shared responsibility—one that transcends borders, industries, and communities. On this International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, let us recognize the hidden currents linking our seafood to global challenges, and commit to supporting prevention, education, and ethical practices across the supply chain. Together, we can break the chains of exploitation and build a healthier, safer future for all.

*For more information on responsible seafood consumption and how you can support the fight against drug abuse and illicit trafficking, visit the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime ([World Drug Day - 26 June](#)).*

## Media Contacts:

SCA Media Contact: CEO, Roy Palmer +61 492825012 or [seafoodsdg@outlook.com](mailto:seafoodsdg@outlook.com)

## *References:*

1. <https://www.awarenessdays.com/awareness-days-calendar/international-day-against-drug-abuse-and-illicit-trafficking-2025/>
2. <https://www.un.org/en/observances/end-drug-abuse-day>
3. <https://www.nextias.com/blog/international-day-against-drug-abuse-and-illicit-trafficking/>
4. <https://ecotrust.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/PRESSRELEASE.FisheriesDrugTrafficking.June.26.2020.pdf>
5. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/organized-crime-is-taking-over-mexican-fisheries/>
6. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2021/07/fish-methamphetamine-substance-abuse-ecosystems-water-sewers-drugs/>
7. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34482147/>
8. <https://www.globalseafood.org/advocate/whats-in-your-fish-fda-reinforces-aquaculture-drug-policy/>
9. <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/food-safety-health/european-authorities-charge-cross-border-crime-ring-with-colluding-to-sell-usd-10-million-of-contaminated-shellfish>
10. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/canadian-drugs-substances-strategy/prevention-education.html>
11. <https://www.unodc.org/drugs/>
12. <https://www.unodc.org/roca/en/campaigns/world-drug-day.html>