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Rethinking Shrimp in Campus Dining

How universities can address food safety issues, ecological harms, and human rights abuses in the shrimp supply chain



Shrimp is widely seen as a light, healthy, and ecologically friendly menu choice, escaping the scrutiny given to climate-intensive animal products like beef. Nearly all shrimp served in the United States, however, comes from intensive aquaculture or industrial trawl fisheries operating overseas with opaque supply

chains. The realities behind shrimp production—from crowded ponds and drug use to destructive fishing and labor abuses—are kept hidden from the public and institutional buyers. For universities committed to healthy food, sustainability, and ethical sourcing, shrimp warrants a closer look.

“The current system of farmed shrimp production is not sustainable - not for workers, the environment, or - ultimately - for retailers, wholesalers, or consumers. The Indian shrimp sector is rife with discrimination, dangerous working conditions, hazardous child labor, sexual harassment, debt bondage, threats and intimidation, toxic sewage, false and misleading certification schemes, and a general lack of oversight.” -Corporate Accountability Lab

>90%

of U.S. shrimp is imported, much of it from countries flagged for labor abuses

2%

of aquaculture imports are inspected by FDA for bacterial contamination

26+ kg

CO₂-eq emitted per kg of farmed shrimp—exceeding pork, poultry, and salmon

The conditions on shrimp farms allow human pathogens to thrive

Most shrimp eaten in the U.S. are raised in warm, shallow ponds designed for rapid growth and high output. Thousands are packed tightly together while waste, uneaten feed, and fecal matter accumulate on the pond floor in thick sludge. These conditions create the perfect breeding ground for bacteria that can cause illness in humans.¹

Shrimp ponds commonly harbor *Salmonella* and *Vibrio* bacteria, which can survive harvest, processing, freezing, and thawing. Once established in pond water and sediments, these pathogens are difficult to eliminate.



Waste, uneaten feed, and chemical pollutants that build up in shrimp ponds are flushed into surrounding waterways at harvest time, harming local fish and wildlife. PHOTO: SEB ALEX / WE ANIMALS

KEY FINDING

Vibrio species were detected in **60%** of retail shrimp samples in the Greater Sacramento area, indicating that bacterial contamination routinely reaches store shelves. Fish and shellfish sicken hundreds of thousands of people annually in the U.S.

Sea animal products cause an estimated 260,000 illnesses each year,² and shrimp has been a repeat offender. In 2021, a multistate outbreak of *Salmonella* Weltevreden was traced to frozen cooked shrimp imported from India.³ Between 2020 and mid-2025, the FDA rejected 469 aquaculture imports—mostly shrimp—for *Salmonella* contamination.⁴ The agency inspects only 2 percent of aquacultural shipments for bacterial contamination, meaning thousands more contaminated products likely passed through undetected.⁵

Vibrio bacteria can cause severe gastrointestinal illness, bloodstream infections, and wound infections through both consumption and handling. A 2023 study of retail shrimp in the Greater Sacramento area detected *Vibrio* species in 60 percent of samples collected from grocery stores, confirming that contamination often reaches store shelves.⁶

In university kitchens, where shrimp is cooked in bulk, cooled, reheated, and handled repeatedly, these risks become hard to control.

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Antibiotic resistance is a hidden public health risk

The rampant disease on shrimp farms makes antibiotics a necessity. Drug use in shrimp production contributes to antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a major public health threat in which bacteria evolve to survive the antibiotics used to treat human infections. As resistance spreads, drugs relied on for pneumonia, sepsis, and routine medical procedures become less effective.

Under U.S. law, no antibiotics are permitted in shrimp sold domestically or imported for sale because of both AMR risks and potential toxicity to humans. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tests roughly 0.1 percent of seafood imports for drug residues, and even at that low rate, inspectors regularly find prohibited antibiotics such as chloramphenicol and nitrofurans, both linked to serious blood disorders, in shrimp shipments.⁷

Studies indicate that these drugs and resistant bacteria both reach consumers. Research in Baton Rouge found nitrofurantoin, a banned antibiotic, in 70 percent of retail farmed shrimp samples tested.⁸ A 2021 study of shrimp sold in Florida and Georgia found bacteria resistant to chloramphenicol in nearly one-fifth of samples.⁹ When people consume shrimp carrying antibiotic-resistant bacteria, resistance genes can transfer to bacteria in the human gut, exacerbating the AMR crisis.

70%

of retail farmed shrimp
in a Baton Rouge study
tested positive for
nitrofurantoin, a
prohibited antibiotic

~1 in 5

shrimp samples in
Florida and Georgia
carried bacteria resistant
to chloramphenicol

0.1%

of seafood imports tested
by FDA for drug residues.
Even so, prohibited
antibiotics are routinely
found

3

Shrimp exacts a heavy toll on oceans and climate

Contrary to shrimp's reputation as a low-impact protein, its production is harmful to ecosystems and the climate. Most wild shrimp is caught using bottom trawling, which drags heavy, weighted nets across the seafloor, decimating habitats, burning large amounts of diesel fuel, and capturing non-target species such as skates and rays.

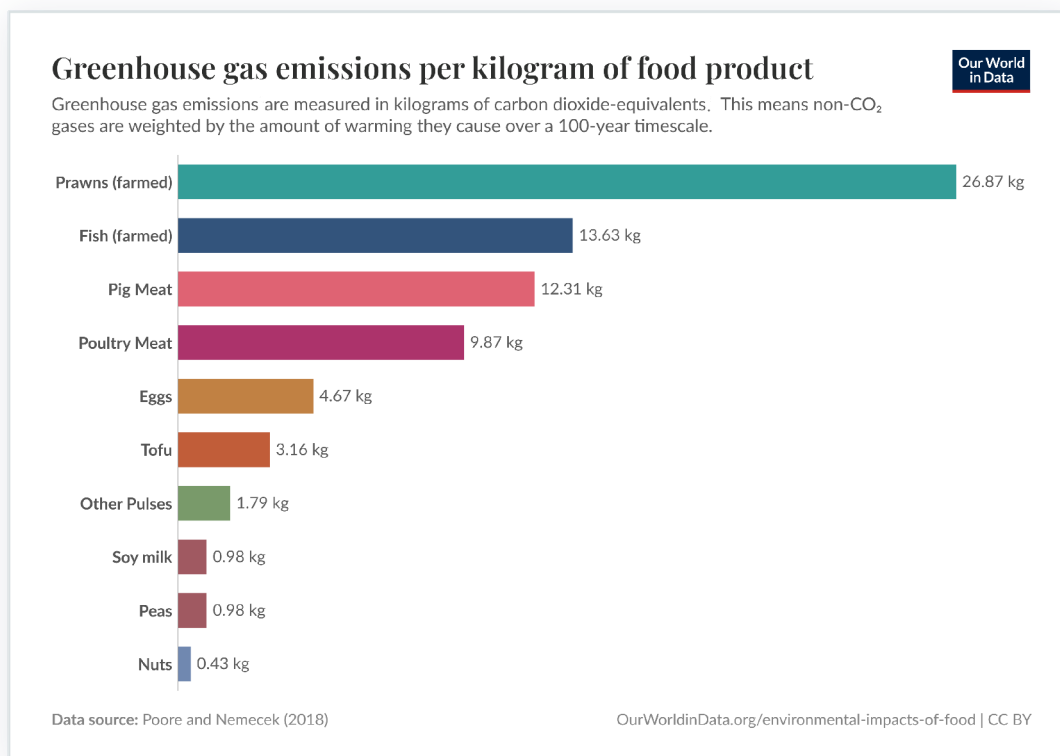
Even "sustainable seafood" certifications and guides, such as the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and Seafood Watch, do not prohibit bottom trawling.^{10, 11} Researchers have estimated that over 80 percent of MSC-labeled sea animal products come from destructive gear types.¹²

Shrimp aquaculture has also driven large-scale destruction of mangrove forests, some of the most carbon-dense ecosystems on Earth. Since the 1980s, shrimp ponds carved into coastal wetlands have accounted for an estimated 38 percent of global mangrove deforestation and more than half of mangrove loss in Southeast Asia.¹³

Mangroves store up to five times more carbon per hectare than most tropical forests, particularly in their deep soils, so clearing them for shrimp farming eliminates one of the planet's most effective carbon sinks.¹⁴



Farmed shrimp is among the most greenhouse gas-intensive sea animal products on the market. Life-cycle analyses estimate emissions of over 26 kg CO₂-equivalent per kilogram of shrimp, exceeding those of salmon, pork, poultry, and even bottom-trawled wild shrimp.^{15, 16} Plant protein sources, on the other hand, carry just a fraction of these carbon costs.



“The carbon footprint of the shrimp from [production on cleared mangrove forests] is about 10-fold greater than the land use carbon footprint of an equivalent amount of beef produced from a pasture formed from a tropical rainforest.” -Biologist J. Boone Kauffman, Oregon State University



PHOTO: JOSHUA FARINELLA / THE OUTLAW OCEAN PROJECT

The shrimp industry has been linked to major human rights abuses, with the U.S. Department of Labor listing shrimp from several countries, including India, the largest supplier to the U.S. market, on its *List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor*.¹⁷

A 2024 investigation by the Outlaw Ocean Project documented forced labor at an Indian farmed shrimp processing facility where migrant workers were charged recruitment fees; confined in cramped, sweltering dormitories; and prohibited from freely leaving.¹⁸ A separate 2024 investigation by the Corporate Accountability Lab found hazardous child labor throughout parts of the supply chain, including teenage girls standing for hours in cold processing rooms and children cutting and cleaning shrimp in peeling sheds.¹⁹

“Sustainable seafood” labels maintain weak standards and limited oversight

Many dining directors have turned to certifications to mitigate these issues. But instead of offering true assurance of responsible practices, certifications have become marketing tools used by the industry to greenwash factory farmed products to well-meaning consumers and food-service professionals. The most widely used sea animal product certifications—Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)—are funded by fees paid by the companies they certify.²⁰ They therefore have no incentive to raise standards above what major companies are willing to accept, or to remove bad actors from the program. Further, BAP’s governing board is majority-controlled by the seafood producers and distributors it is supposed to oversee.²¹

The standards themselves reflect this conflict of interest. BAP allows antibiotic use with only vague veterinary oversight and no meaningful caps on drug treatments.²² Neither BAP nor ASC requires that every certified site be independently audited every year, and farms with serious violations have been allowed to keep their certification.²³ Even Seafood Watch, often considered the most independent rating system, does not visit or audit individual farms; it rates broad species and regions, potentially allowing a farm with serious problems to hide inside a favorable average.²⁴



A retail package bearing a Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) seal

CASE STUDY: CERTIFICATION FAILURE

The 2024 Outlaw Ocean Project investigation offers a glimpse into the failures of the certification model. In recorded conversations, a plant manager admitted that shrimp was fraudulently documented as BAP-certified. Despite this and major labor abuses, the facility remained BAP-certified, with BAP-labeled products still appearing on store shelves.²⁵

A "sustainable seafood" seal is not a guarantee of sustainability. Relying on these labels can actively undermine an institution's own climate and sustainability commitments, and puts dining programs at risk of overstating their environmental credentials to diners and administrators.

6 The easy solution: remove and replace

Removing shrimp from campus menus is the quickest and easiest way to avoid these harms. Doing so also makes campus dining more accessible. Shrimp is one of the nine major food allergens under U.S. law,²⁶ and eliminating it reduces cross-contact risk in high-volume kitchens. Moreover, shrimp has been identified as one of the greatest contributors of microplastic exposure among commonly consumed sea animal products.²⁷

Making this shift does not require a major menu overhaul. Shrimp is not a staple food, and plant-based proteins can readily fill its place in tacos, stir-fries, bowls, and pasta. Experiment with ingredients like tofu, chickpeas, and seaweed, or try one of the many plant-based analogs capturing seafood's briny flavor. And the change can be popular: at Scripps College, students secured an agreement to remove shrimp after demonstrating strong support.

For universities working to align food purchasing with sustainability and ethical sourcing commitments, swapping out shrimp with more plant-based proteins is a simple yet powerful step.



Plant-based "shrimp" is versatile, delicious, and sustainable. PHOTO: THE PLANT

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Get started:

We're here to support you, whether you're exploring a shrimp-free policy or seeking out more plant-based options.

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