

Mystery Fish

Mislabeled cheaper fish to substitute for a more expensive variety

Some guessing games can be fun to play. But not when it comes to identifying the food we eat.

Oceana, a nonprofit marine advocacy group, released the results of its nationwide retail seafood labeling investigation on February 21, 2013. From 2010 to 2012, the group conducted the largest seafood fraud investigation to date- covering 21 states and collecting 1,200 samples from 674 restaurants and grocery stores. By using DNA testing, the researchers were able to determine the true identity of the fish. Their results were stunning.

The investigation found a pattern of using cheaper fish to substitute for a more expensive variety. For example, Tilapia at \$3.00 a pound was sold as Red Snapper for as much as \$12.00 per pound. Cheaper farm raised fish was sold as the more expensive wild caught fish. This was a common find with salmon. Snapper and tuna were repeat offenders, being mislabeled 87% and 59% of the time (respectively).

Seafood fraud cheats the consumer out of their money and can put their health at risk. King mackerel, a fish the FDA warns as having high mercury levels, was passed off as Grouper. Escolar, which can cause serious digestive problems for some people, was frequently sold as white tuna.

More than one third of the samples were found to be mislabeled. Fraudulent fish were found across the country and at various establishments. Sushi vendors were the worst, with

a mislabeling rate of 74 %, while grocery stores were the best with a mislabeling rate of 18% .

A full 90 % of the seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported; only 1% of which is tested for authenticity. Congressman Edward Markey (Mass.) calls the frequent mislabeling of fish an "epidemic". One suggested measure for controlling the problem is mandatory traceability- from boat to plate- of all imported seafood.

Until new regulations are in place, there is very little consumers can do to avoid mislabeled fish, especially if buying a fillet. Purchasing whole fish will help identify the product. And it would be wise to be wary of deals that are "too good to be true."

Stricter enforcement will protect the consumer, help to ensure legitimate fishermen stay in business, and help keep our oceans safe from over fishing.