

Deceptive Dishes: Seafood Swaps Found Worldwide



Seafood fraud, specifically species substitution or mislabeling, is an old and growing problem.

It threatens consumer health and safety, cheats consumers when they pay higher prices for a mislabeled lower-value fish, and can hide at-sea crimes like illegal fishing and human rights abuses. As global fishing becomes more expansive and further industrialized, seafood fraud and its related impacts could get even worse.

Traceability throughout the entire seafood supply chain—from fishing boat or farm to dinner plate—would help reduce the level of seafood fraud and the financial harm that

results, while also providing consumers with more information about their seafood purchases. Because mislabeling may be used to hide illegal fishing, it is doubly important to improve transparency and accountability. In addition to the economic cost—annual losses due to illegal fishing worldwide are estimated to be between \$10 billion and \$23.5 billion annually—illegal fishing also puts severe stress on fish populations and marine ecosystems.

Oceana reviewed more than 200 published studies from 55 countries demonstrating the global scope of seafood fraud. While the average mislabeling rate worldwide is 34 percent, the rate normalized to sample size is 19 percent. This means that the average was weighted by sample size, so studies with a greater number of samples were given a higher weight.

European Union: A Promising Case Study

The EU case study is encouraging. Following numerous seafood fraud investigations over 12 years and public attention to the problem, the EU implemented measures aimed at preventing illegal fishing and improving transparency and accountability in the seafood supply chain. Since 2011, overall seafood fraud rates appear to decrease, with the average level reaching 8 percent in 2015. The preliminary data out of the EU suggest that catch documentation, traceability and consumer labeling are feasible and effective at reducing seafood fraud.

The United States is poised to implement its own measures to combat illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing and seafood fraud. If the U.S. adopts requirements similar to or stronger than those in the EU, it would mean that for the first time, the world's two largest seafood importers could wield meaningful standards ensuring the legality, safety and honest labeling of seafood, the effects of which would be felt throughout the global seafood supply chain.



One in five

of the more than 25,000 samples of seafood tested worldwide was mislabeled, on average. The studies reviewed found seafood mislabeling at every sector of the seafood supply chain: retail, wholesale, distribution, import/export, packaging/processing and landing.

82%

of the 200 grouper, perch and swordfish samples tested in Italy were mislabeled, and almost half of the substituted fish that were sold were species that are considered threatened with extinction by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Asian catfish, hake and escolar were the three types of fish most commonly substituted.

Specifically, farmed Asian catfish was sold as 18 different types of higher-value fish.



More than half (58 percent)

of the samples substituted for other seafood posed a species-specific health risk to consumers, meaning that consumers could be eating fish that could make them sick.

Every study found seafood fraud, except for one.

The majority of the studies (65 percent) include clear evidence of an economic motivation for the seafood mislabeling.

Seafood fraud was investigated in 55 countries on every continent except for Antarctica.

A student project at a university in Chicago identified 16 mislabeled samples out of 52—mostly cheaper fish misrepresented as more expensive ones.

In the United Kingdom, a consumer watchdog group discovered a number of cases in which haddock were being sold as more expensive cod, and whiting were being sold as more expensive haddock.

Ninety-eight percent of the 69 bluefin tuna dishes tested in Brussels restaurants were actually another fish.

A 2015 German study found about half of the samples sold as “sole” to be lower-value fish upon testing.

A Santa Monica restaurant and two sushi chefs were charged for selling whale meat, including meat from the endangered sei whale. The restaurant, which has since closed, had labeled the whale as fatty tuna to hide its true identity when it was shipped to the restaurant in order to sell whale sushi.

In Brazil, 55 percent of “shark” samples tested were actually largemouth sawfish, a species considered by the IUCN to be critically endangered and for which trade is prohibited in Brazil.

In a 2014 study, lower-value South African hake was revealed to have been sold as higher-value European hake in Spain.

Due to its high price and the difficulty in identifying its source, caviar is especially susceptible to fraud. Of 27 caviar samples tested from a variety of vendors around the Black Sea and the Danube River, 10 were identified as something other than what the label claimed. Three of the “caviar” samples tested contained no animal DNA at all. It is unknown what exactly these counterfeit caviar samples were made of.

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Recommendations

The future health of our oceans is bound inextricably to responsible stewardship. Governments across the world must insist upon well-managed fishing practices as well as a transparent and accountable seafood supply chain. Information about seafood—including which species it is, whether it is farm-raised, or how and where it is caught—should follow a product from the farm or the fishing boat all the way to the end consumer. The linked, dual problems of illegal fishing and seafood fraud are vast, but they share a common solution: full-chain traceability.

The Presidential Task Force on Combating IUU Fishing and Seafood Fraud is at a critical crossroads. As the proposed Seafood Import Monitoring Program rule is being finalized and beyond, there are key opportunities to ensure that all seafood sold in the U.S. is safe, legally caught and honestly labeled.

The President's Task Force should:

- Require key information to follow seafood through the full supply chain, from the boat or farm to the dinner plate. That information should include species-specific names, where and how a product was caught, or whether it was farmed.
- Expand traceability requirements to all seafood in the final rule or, at a minimum, commit to a timeline to do so.
- Extend traceability requirements through the entire seafood supply chain.
- Provide consumers with more information about the seafood they purchase and eat.

For Oceana's full report, please visit oceana.org/DeceptiveDishes.