Oceana Reveals Mislabling of Iconic Chesapeake Blue Crab

One of the most delicious ways for diners to sample the fruits of the Chesapeake Bay is with a Maryland crab cake. The iconic blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*), is the official Maryland state crustacean and a prized catch in the Chesapeake region. The blue crab, popular with many locals and tourists, also underpins the most profitable fishery in Maryland and the Chesapeake Bay, supporting the livelihoods of thousands of local watermen and crab processors.

As part of Oceana’s ongoing investigation into seafood fraud, we examined one of Maryland and Washington, D.C.’s favorite seafood dishes, the Maryland crab cake. Oceana collected 90 crab cakes from 86 restaurants throughout the region during the 2014 Maryland crab season to identify the species used in each dish. Through DNA testing, we found that 38 percent of the crab cakes were mislabeled. Instead of using the iconic blue crab, the crab cakes were comprised of imported substitutes, most of which are fished unsustainably.

This mislabeling rate is consistent with Oceana’s previous studies on fish and shrimp. In 2013, Oceana found that one-third of more than 1,200 fish samples were mislabeled according to Food and Drug Administration guidelines. We also found 30 percent of shrimp samples to be misrepresented to consumers in a similar study in 2014.

This type of seafood fraud inflates the price for consumers, parades imported and sometimes illegally caught crab as local, prevents consumers from making sustainable seafood choices, and harms the livelihoods of local crabbers and processors. Without traceability that requires important information to follow seafood from the fishing boat to the final consumer, this type of fraud will continue to occur.

Out of 90 crab cakes sampled, 38 percent were mislabeled.

- **Baltimore**: 46% Mislabeled
- **Annapolis**: 47% Mislabeled
- **Washington, D.C.**: 39% Mislabeled
- **Ocean City**: 38% Mislabeled
- **Maryland Eastern Shore**: 9% Mislabeled

© MARYLAND DNR | Jay Fleming
KEY RESULTS

- Although Oceana attempted to purchase only local blue crab, 48% of the crab cakes tested used swimming crab species from the Indo-Pacific region (44%) and the Mexican Pacific coast (4%).

- The most frequently mislabeled crab cakes were those labeled as “Maryland,” followed by those referred to as “blue crab.”

- In total, we found eight species other than the blue crab present in crab cakes purchased in Maryland and D.C.

- Nearly half of the species found in the crab cakes we tested are listed as species to “avoid” on seafood guides, while the real Maryland blue crab is considered a “best choice” or “good alternative” depending on where and how it was caught.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Once again, Oceana found that consumers are frequently getting duped when trying to make informed decisions and support the local seafood industry. Traceability, or tracking seafood from the fishing boat to the dinner plate, would provide seafood buyers with more confidence in their purchases.

President Obama’s Task Force on Combatting Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Seafood Fraud issued its final recommendations and action plan in March 2015. The plan outlines domestic and international measures to keep black market and fraudulent seafood out of the U.S. market. Oceana strongly encourages the task force to put these words into action to require traceability for all seafood sold in the U.S. to ensure that it is safe, legally caught and honestly labeled. Without traceability and more information provided to seafood consumers, Maryland crab cake buyers may still fall victim to a seafood bait and switch.

For Oceana’s full crab report, please visit oceana.org/crabfraud.