



Consumers can support sustainable fishing methods

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OUR OPINION: How do you know that's really grouper on your plate?

A buyer, beware factoid popped up in staff writer Michael Vasquez's Aug. 24 article, Snapper on your plate may be an impostor. The price of domestic grouper, most of which is caught in the Gulf of Mexico, costs restaurants \$11 or \$12 a pound.

If the menu says it will cost you \$10 or less for a grouper dinner, order something else because chances are you'll be getting a substitute imported fish as your entree.

The same warning applies to another popular fish caught off Florida's coast: red snapper. Unfortunately for the gullible diner, tilapia resembles red snapper in appearance and is cheaper for restaurants to buy.

Unscrupulous practice

Sometimes, it isn't the restaurant that's trying to pawn off a cheaper fish, it's the seafood distributor. Either way, the unscrupulous practice is hard to regulate. Nevertheless, the Food and Drug Administration could do better. A federal Government Accountability Office report noted this year that the FDA's oversight of fish markets and restaurants was ineffective and uncoordinated.

We know these shady substitutions happen more than restaurateurs and distributors would like to admit, thanks to Professor Mahmood Shivji of Nova Southeastern University. He created a way to test the DNA of sharks to help authorities crack down on the shark fin trade, which, with a few exceptions, is illegal in the United States.

After CBS4's consumer reporter Al Sunshine asked Professor Shivji to test DNA samples of local restaurant fish fare, it became clear that diners weren't always getting what they ordered. This shouldn't be happening in one of the nation's seafood capitals.

Marine life under siege

Behind it are several factors, but the most important one is that prized food fish like grouper and red snapper are being overfished. Unsustainable and wasteful fishing practices are a big problem. Millions of tons of so-called bycatch -- species not considered marketable -- are killed each year in fishing nets. Marine life is also under siege from pollution and global warming heating up our oceans.

Consumers can support sustainable fishing methods and restoration of depleted species by only eating seafood that is in abundant supply or is farmed in environmentally safe ways. These include Arctic char, catfish, mahi-mahi, black sea bass, Pacific sole (Atlantic sole is overfished), tilapia, Florida stone crab (hooray) plus Dungeness, blue and king crab, American caviar, farmed shrimp and clams, mussels and oysters.

Chances are, if you order any of these in a restaurant you'll get what you asked for because they are readily available.