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Bait and switch: fish fraud flourishes

By [Mike Clary](#), Sun Sentinel

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When you order snapper, grouper or white tuna at your local restaurant, market or sushi emporium, there is almost a one-in-three chance you will be served tilapia or some less expensive fish instead, warn researchers who sampled 60 South Florida businesses. advertisement

Most alarming was one instance where a fish sold as grouper turned out to be king mackerel, a species federal and state authorities advise women of childbearing age not to eat because of high mercury levels that can harm a fetus.

According to the results of a study released today by the conservation group Oceana, the fish most often mislabeled was red snapper. In six of seven samples from restaurants and markets, a consumer got something else.

"Given that Florida is a state that tests regularly, I was wondering if we would find any fraud at all," said marine scientist Kimberly Warner, chief author of the study. "Why in the world would people think they can get away with this? That it's happening is quite shocking."

Among the most egregious offenders were sushi restaurants. White tuna was mislabeled 100 percent of the time in the 31 sushi venues sampled, as was whitefish and yellowtail, the survey found.

In sushi, a common substitute for white tuna or whitefish was escolar, also called snake mackerel, another fish with a health warning. "It can cause severe gastrointestinal problems," said Warner.

Based in Washington D.C. and with an office in Fort Lauderdale, Oceana is the largest international organization focused solely on ocean conservation. For this study, it sampled seafood mainly in the Fort Lauderdale and Miami areas, but included samples from Palm Beach and Monroe counties. The investigation was part of a national Stop Seafood Fraud campaign.

Fish fraud is worse elsewhere. Oceana found South Florida had about a 20 percent lower rate than Boston and Los Angeles.

Floridians eat twice as much seafood on average as others in the U.S., studies have found. And with an appetite like that, fraud has long been on the menu, according to Warner.

In the mid-1980s, the state's Department of Consumer Affairs revealed widespread seafood mislabeling in stores

and processing plants. In 1988, a Sun Sentinel investigation found that less expensive snappers were routinely substituted for red snapper.

In the mid-2000s, grouper fraud was prevalent in Florida and the Gulf, when Vietnamese catfish was often substituted.

Last year a Nova Southeastern University genetics class tested fish advertised as white tuna from 10 sushi restaurants in Broward, Miami Dade and Palm Beach Counties. The results showed eight were improperly labeled, said Mahmood Shivji, director of the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova's Oceanographic Center. A similar study in 2010 showed all 10 surveyed restaurants in South Florida and Orlando served escolar as white tuna.

The state inspects restaurants regularly and can require owners to provide invoices showing the seafood they sell matches what they received from distributors. Restaurants can be fined up to \$1,000 for mislabeling seafood, and its license revoked or suspended.

"There are more resources in Florida than anywhere else, but it isn't enough," said Warner. "There is still fraud, so something is not working."

Fraud can occur anywhere along the supply chain, beginning on the boat that hauled the fish to the distributor to the fish shack that offers a grouper sandwich for a bargain price.

Oceana's latest survey was conducted in December 2011 and January of this year. Researchers collected 96 samples from 60 retail outlets, including 40 percent from grocery stores, 25 percent from restaurants and 31 percent from sushi venues. The restaurants and sushi shops included those rated highly by Zagat and Yelp.

Species targeted for testing included those found to be mislabeled in previous studies: red and yellowtail snapper, grouper, wild salmon, and yellowtail and white tuna. These species made up most of those sampled.

While fish advertised as red snapper was misidentified in six of seven samples, grouper mislabeling dropped from a high of 40 to 50 percent in the mid-2000s to 16 percent now, Oceana found.

This "demonstrates clearly that inspections alone will not fix the problem," the study's authors wrote. "Full traceability of the seafood supply chain from boat to plate, combined with verification and accountability, is needed to ensure that the seafood sold in the United States is safe, legal and honestly labeled."

That will not be easy.

"Consumer protection agencies at the state and federal level have been involved for a long time, but given the volume of products that come through, they don't have the resources for oversight," said Shivji, who reviewed the Oceana study. "And without adequate oversight, there is opportunity for people to pull a fast one and sell you a product different than advertised. It's a conundrum."

Both Shivji and Warner urge consumers to ask questions. "If you ask the waiter, 'Is this grouper?', they may say yes but they really might not know," said Shivji. "The restaurant manager might not know."

"But if enough people ask, it might put pressure on suppliers to make sure they are getting the right product."

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