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Fish you buy may not be what you think

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When you order fish at your favorite South Florida restaurant or buy fillets from the supermarket, there's a chance you are not eating what you thought you bought. The marine conservation group Oceana recently tested 96 fish samples purchased from 60 outlets from West Palm Beach to Key Largo and found that nearly one-third of the seafood was mislabeled.

According to Oceana's report released Monday, the species most often misrepresented was red snapper, which usually turned out to be a less-expensive snapper species such as dog snapper or lane snapper, and even sea bream from the Pacific — not a snapper at all — in 86 percent of samples. Grouper, mislabeled 16 percent of the time, was substituted with king mackerel or Asian catfish in several samples.

The report says sushi sellers were the worst offenders, with 58 percent of samples mislabeled. Fish advertised as "white tuna" turned out to be escolar — a snake mackerel containing a toxin that causes digestive distress — in all the samples collected from 15 sushi venues in South Florida, Oceana said.

Grocery stores had the lowest numbers of wrongly labeled fish — about 8 percent of samples collected. Restaurants were in the middle at 36 percent.

Oceana senior scientist Kimberly Warner, one of the report's co-authors, says seafood fraud has a negative impact on consumers' wallets, health and the health of the world's oceans.

"Depressing, very troubling," Warner said last week in a telephone interview. "This is not a local problem. We see it every place we look."

The good news for South Florida: seafood fraud is less rampant here than in Southern California where Oceana found more than half the fish samples it tested from grocery stores and restaurants were something other than what was advertised, and in the Boston area where up to 48 percent of seafood was mislabeled.

Warner said eating the wrong fish can cause health problems for consumers who are allergic. There's also the potential for ciguatera — a neurotoxin found in some large reef fish that can lead to chronic, long-lasting symptoms. In the case of king mackerel being substituted for grouper, there's the issue of mercury: the Food and Drug Administration says women of child-bearing age and children should not eat kingfish due to high levels of the heavy metal. Escolar, falsely called 'white tuna' by some sellers, is the subject of FDA health warnings for its gastric effects.

Seafood fraud also hits consumers in the wallet, the report warns, when they pay for what they

think is red snapper but is really tilapia — a much-cheaper, farmed freshwater fish. Diners who thought they were eating “wild” or “king” salmon got farmed Atlantic salmon instead about 19 percent of the time.

Warner said Florida has put a lot of effort into ferreting out seafood fraud, but “extra efforts in traceability is going to be the ultimate solution,” she said. The U.S. imports more than 85 percent of its seafood, and Warner said the supply chain worldwide is very murky—“it’s very hard to tell the path from when it’s caught to when it reaches your plate.”

Mahmood Shivji, an expert in genetics who heads the Guy Harvey Research Institute at Nova Southeastern University Oceanographic Center in Dania Beach, has performed DNA testing on numerous seafood samples over the past few years. He reviewed the Oceana report but did not conduct any testing for it.

Shivji wasn’t surprised at the findings, and said more could be done to track and test seafood as it makes its way from the water to the plate, “but the agencies that are supposed to be doing it don’t have the resources, so you’re stuck,” he said.

He suggested suppliers could pay for DNA testing, which costs about \$200 for a sample the size of a fingernail, then provide a certificate.

“I don’t think you need to test every fillet,” Shivji said. “Do spot checks. If you do it on a larger scale, the cost comes down.”

Bob Jones, executive director of the 300-member Southeastern Fisheries Association, says his organization works with state and federal agencies to make sure fish sold in Florida are properly identified, and accurately weighed and measured before they appear on consumers’ plates.

“The health aspects, the economic aspects of selling you a fish you didn’t ask for, that concerns us greatly,” Jones said.

But Jones says current requirements of the FDA, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and others overseeing the seafood supply chain — especially in the wake of 9/11 terrorism threats — are adequate.

“I find it’s mostly in the restaurants,” Jones said. “You get a seller that says, ‘I can give you a fish that tastes as good as grouper for less money.’ We have no problem till he calls a catfish a grouper. We are very conscientious about what we do and how our members operate.”

Carol Dover, president/CEO of the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association, called seafood fraud in Florida “completely unacceptable.”

“We fully support enforcement efforts requiring truthful labeling and representation of all seafood products,” Dover wrote in an email. “We urge not only our members but the entire industry to protect themselves and their customers by using only transparent and reputable seafood suppliers.”

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