



Seafood labelling needs stricter enforcement

A new study finds that a quarter of fish products labelled as 'cod' or 'haddock' in Dublin, Ireland, are in fact completely different species of fish. This indicates that fish consumers are being misled by inaccurate labels, which could compromise sustainable fishing and consumption efforts.

Accurate seafood labels can help encourage sustainable fishing, by allowing consumers to make informed purchasing decisions. The EU has a strict labelling policy¹ and fresh fishery products must be labelled with an approved commercial description, the production method used and the area in which the fish were caught. This means seafood must not be sold under a name that misrepresents the contents. To describe the product, Member States use a list of common names that are acceptable for the species, which are produced by responsible bodies, for example, the Irish Sea Fisheries Board in Ireland and the Food Standards Agency in the UK.

The study explored the implementation of current EU labelling policies in Ireland. It used a case study approach and analysed the mislabelling of two types of whitefish, Atlantic cod and haddock, in Dublin. 156 samples of fish labelled as either 'cod' or 'haddock' were collected from 60 retail outlets in ten postal districts of the city. The outlets included supermarkets, fishmongers and take-away restaurants. The samples were analysed using DNA bar-coding, which has been used in forensic species identification.

The results indicated that approximately 25 per cent of these samples turned out to be mislabelled. Most were saith or pollack labelled as cod. There were also a few cases of cod labelled as haddock, and vice versa, and in some other samples, Pacific cod was mislabelled as Atlantic cod. Smoked products were particularly prone to mislabelling and made up over 70 per cent of the samples. Nearly half of the cod products obtained from one major international retailer (seven out of sixteen samples) had been mislabelled and, using current market statistics, it was estimated the company could be inflating their profits by €400,000 to €550,000 per year from cod sales in Ireland alone.

Although the sample is small and from only one city, the figures are alarming. Not only because consumers are being misinformed, but also because of the larger implications for sustainable fishing. Ironically, high levels of cod mislabeling could increase the problem of declining sources of cod by creating a false perception of a plentiful supply; consumers could be led to believe that stocks must be healthy because 'cod' is so readily available. As a result, they may not believe policy messages and campaigns that aim to address diminishing fish reserves.

Further research is needed on the implementation of seafood labelling in other EU countries, but the results indicate a need for improved labelling enforcement. This could be aided by assigning just one national agency to enforcing labelling and standards; in Ireland, there are currently three government agencies each with different interests in the operation of the industry. Better labelling could also be ensured by reliable tracing systems that track imported seafood from international sources. The development of accurate and cost-effective tools to genetically identify seafood at all stages in the production chain would further improve implementation.

1. See <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=CELEX:32001R2065:EN:HTML>

Source: Miller, D.D. & Mariani, S. (2010) Smoke, mirrors, and mislabeled cod: poor transparency in the European seafood industry. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 8: 517-521.

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