



Combating 'cod fraud' in Europe

Higher public awareness of sustainable fishing practices, led by environmental NGOs, may have helped reduce the incidence of mislabelled fish in the UK, compared to Ireland, according to a recent study which assessed levels of fish fraudulently sold as 'cod' in these two countries.

Consumer purchasing habits are the primary driver of fishing industry practices. The demand from responsible consumers for sustainably sourced products has ensured that under EU law¹, fresh fish and seafood must be clearly labelled with the species name, method of production (wild or farmed) and catch area.

However, evidence of seafood mislabelling is becoming increasingly common. This removes the ability of the consumer to make informed choices and weakens the link between supply and demand, which can indirectly affect domestic and international fisheries. Scientists have also highlighted the potential health risk of mislabelled food. In a new study, scientists genetically analysed 226 cod products (frozen, battered, breadcrumbed, smoked and fresh filleted) available from a range of supermarkets, fishmongers and take-away shops across the UK and Ireland. They identified each species from the DNA 'barcode' of each.

When the scientists compared the DNA result with the product label, they found that of the 226 samples, 19.5% were mislabelled. A far greater proportion of the samples purchased in Ireland were mislabelled (37 of 131, 28.2%) compared to the UK (7 of 95, 7.4%). However, both frequencies of mislabelling were unacceptably high, say the researchers.

Lower occurrence of 'cod fraud' in the UK than in Ireland may be partly attributed to higher consumer awareness, the result of activities by Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations, including Greenpeace and the Marine Stewardship Council, which are mainly centred in the UK.

Despite information on the catch method not being obligatory under EU law, 69% of samples in the UK included this information, compared to 40% in Ireland, which may also reflect greater consumer awareness of sustainability issues.

Mislabelling was not restricted to a particular product. However, the fact that 39 of the 44 mislabelled samples were smoked, breaded or battered suggests that the problem may be more common in processed products, where the likelihood of genuine misidentification is higher.

In the vast majority of mislabelled products, the fish was labelled as cod but identified as less expensive and more abundant species (pangasius, European white pollack, saithe, whiting and haddock). However, a more concerning issue occurred where fish labelled as 'sustainably sourced' Pacific Cod was identified as the more vulnerable Atlantic cod. The authors suggest that this phenomenon should be investigated more in depth, as it could in part be linked to the illegal re-cycling of unreported landings.

Packaged fish products in the EU also require a unique 'approval number' to allow them to be traced back to the supplier. However, this study could not determine whether the responsibility for mislabelling lay at the retailer or supplier level.

The researchers suggest several actions to tackle mislabelling, including increasing public awareness and more effective policy enforcement. Specifically, this could include a monitoring system to check label authenticity and to ensure industry compliance, DNA identification and adequate punishment for those who continue to defraud consumers.

1. Commission Regulation (EC) No. 2065/2001. Available from: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2001:278:0006:0008:EN:PDF>

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