

Canwest News Service

Canadians who buy fish may be getting scaled: study

By Sarah Schmidt, Canwest News Service
November 11, 2009

OTTAWA — Canadian consumers should think twice about paying a premium to eat high-end fish because it could actually be a cheap substitute, according to a new cross-country fish investigation spearheaded by high-school students.

One in four fish samples taken from restaurants, supermarkets and fish markets across the country was mislabelled or misidentified as higher-priced or more desirable fish species, according to University of Guelph biology professor Robert Hanner, who released the results on Wednesday at an international conference in Mexico City.

This means white tuna or red snapper could actually be tilapia and wild Pacific salmon could be farmed Atlantic salmon.

Fillets marketed as Mediterranean red mullet could really be spotted goatfish and fish sold as Alaskan halibut might be Atlantic halibut, considered endangered.

Hanner, along with the Toronto-based Bioscience Education Canada, recruited 166 high-school students from Richmond, B.C., Edmonton, Saskatoon, Guelph, Toronto, Ottawa, Riverview, N.B. and Halifax to collect samples from the frozen food aisle of large grocery stores, local fish markets and restaurants in their communities.

"We were collecting lots of salmon and tuna," said Wennie Walker, a biology teacher at Richmond Secondary School, whose students ventured into shops on Granville Island in Vancouver and sushi restaurants in Richmond.

"We tried to go where people thought they would be buying expensive fish."

The 500 samples collected nationally were genetically tested at the Barcode for Life DNA database in Guelph, Ont., an international collaboration of scientists from 25 countries to genetically identify all the fish species in the world. Mislabelling was detected in all regions surveyed, said Hanner, co-ordinator for the Fish Barcode of Life initiative.

The findings of the national market survey are consistent with results published last year involving a smaller study of 96 fish samples from restaurants and markets in Toronto and

New York City; Hanner and co-author Eugene Wong tested their gene sequencing to the global DNA database of fish species and found mislabelling in about 25 per cent of the cases.

Hanner said the national survey, designed to determine the percentage in Canada of fish sold as another species and to engage young people in science, was less tightly controlled, but the results point to a cross-country problem of consumer fraud.

This likely occurs during processing and distribution, not at the retail level or at the dockside with fishermen, he said.

Fish mislabelling can have dangerous consequences for people with life-threatening allergies to certain species, said science teacher Jane Lee, whose students at Northern Collegiate high school in Toronto collected 96 samples throughout the city.

"That's the kind of thing that we would be really concerned about. We want to prevent people from eating fish that's going to make them sick. It was really significant for one of our students whose dad is allergic to certain types of fish. She was really interested in how much mislabelling there is on a personal level," Lee said in an interview Wednesday.

Other participants in the national survey hailed from All Saints Catholic high school in Ottawa, Walter Murray Collegiate in Saskatoon and Old Scona Academic high school in Edmonton.

Biology teacher Lori Brohman recruited some 95 students from Old Scona to collect over 100 samples from supermarkets and restaurants in Edmonton. She said the results should be an eye-opener for consumers.

"Being that most of us are flatlanders here in Alberta, we just sort of rely on whatever we're told, so I think a new awareness may be starting for what it is you're purchasing," said Brohman.

The students collected the samples after the Canadian Food Inspection Agency issued a public call to the industry last September to avoid using "false, misleading or deceptive" labels.

In the wake of Hanner's published study, the director of CFIA's fish and seafood program wrote in an open letter that the agency wants all common and market names used for fish species sold or processed in Canada to "foster fair market practices," and to ensure their labels "are not false, misleading or deceptive, and are consistently supported by reliable scientific references."



Curry Roasted Pink Salmon. A study warns consumers to beware that high-priced fish is sometimes substituted by cheaper fish.

Photograph by: Darren Stone, Times Colonist