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Study finds fishy labelling at restaurants, markets

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OTTAWA - Fish lovers and sushi connoisseurs beware: Fillets marketed as Mediterranean red mullet could really be spotted goatfish, and a white tuna wrap may just be Mozambique tilapia.

A new Canadian study using DNA bar-coding technology found that one in four fish samples taken from Toronto and New York restaurants and stores were mislabelled.

In all cases, they were sold to unsuspecting consumers as higher-priced or more-desirable fish species.

And in two cases, the tests, conducted by University of Guelph researchers at the Biodiversity Institute of Ontario, revealed the popular red snapper was actually the endangered Acadian redfish.

CREDIT: Molly Riley/Reuters

Snapper was sold as lavender jobfish, Labrador redfish, perch and cod. Fish sold as Alaskan halibut was actually Atlantic halibut, considered a species at risk.

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"It's not entirely clear where the mislabelling is happening. We don't think it's on the dockside with the fisherman or by the retailers. It's likely during processing and distribution," said Robert Hanner, associate director of the Guelph-based Canadian Barcode of Life Network.

He and co-author Eugene Wong tested 96 fish samples and compared their gene sequencing to a global DNA database of fish species.

The database, a collaboration of more than 200 scientists, is still growing, so Hanner wanted to test the database to see if it could have practical applications - about 5,400 fish species have been identified out of about 30,000.

The results should be a wake-up call for consumers and government regulators, said Hanner.

"From consumer fraud to food safety and environmental protection, the technological capacity is there to test fish."

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration haven't set their sights on fillets or sushi, partly because of their emphasis on beef and partly

because of the technological limits on genetic testing of fillets.

Hanner said there are no more excuses. And regulators could soon have more data spelling out problems in the sushi and fish markets in Canada.

Next month, Hanner and his team will begin a national market survey involving high-school students across Canada. They will collect the fish and sushi samples to be tested at the Guelph lab.

The formula has already worked. Hanner collaborated with two high school students for the New York portion of this study; Kate Stoeckle, 19, and Louisa Strauss, 18, approached him after discovering the DNA bar-code project, and asked if the lab would test the results if they collected them.

"Consumers really should get what they pay for. It's like fake designer labels. When you're paying $500 for a certain brand, you should be getting it," Stoeckle said. She also said consumers will be dismayed to know they're unknowingly consuming endangered species on occasion.

Pointing to a recent food-poisoning investigation in Chicago, Hanner said there's also a serious health issue.

DNA bar codes were used to help confirm the identity of toxic puffer fish in a local market after it had been imported illegally into the United States as "headless monkfish."

The investigation led to the recall of 282 cases of mislabelled product in three states.

Results of the new study will be published in the forthcoming edition of Food Research International.

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