

Mislabelled: Montreal Investigation Results and How to Fix Canada's Seafood Fraud Problem

Backgrounder

What is seafood fraud?

- Seafood fraud is any activity that misrepresents a seafood product being sold. It threatens public health and food safety, weakens the environmental and economic sustainability of fisheries, and cheats consumers and the Canadian fishing industry. It also masks global human rights abuses by creating a market for illegally caught fish.
- A particularly troubling form of seafood fraud is species substitution: swapping cheaper, less desirable or more readily available species for more expensive ones. This can include swapping farmed products for wild caught and black-market fish for legally caught varieties. Mislabelling includes presenting false, incomplete or misleading information about the product.
- Mislabelling can happen on this scale because the global seafood supply chain is obscure and increasingly complex. Once a fish has been caught, it can travel halfway around the world for processing, crossing many national borders before it ends up on our plate.

Seafood fraud hurts our health, our oceans and our wallets

- **Health:** When one fish species is substituted for another, or incorrect information is provided, consumers are put at risk of exposure to parasites, allergens, contaminants, aquaculture drugs and pesticides used in industrial farming operations, or natural toxins found in certain species.
- **Oceans:** Seafood fraud provides a pathway for illegally caught fish to enter the market. In addition, when a cheaper, more abundant fish is mislabelled as a more expensive, less abundant one, it can give consumers a perception that the population is healthier than it actually is. This undermines efforts to stop overfishing, manage fisheries responsibly and protect areas and animals in need of conservation.
- **Wallets:** Seafood fraud cheats consumers who are not getting what they pay for. Deliberate seafood fraud is often driven by economic gain. Cheap or more readily available species are mislabelled so they can be sold as expensive, desirable or supply-limited ones. Not only do consumers get cheated out of what they paid for, but responsible seafood businesses face unfair market competition.

National testing results

- DNA testing conducted by Oceana Canada from 2017 to 2019 has revealed that an alarming 47 per cent of 472 seafood samples tested from food retailers and restaurants in six Canadian cities were mislabelled. This includes testing in Victoria (67% mislabelled), Montreal (61% mislabelled) Toronto (59% mislabelled), Ottawa (46% mislabelled), Halifax (38% mislabelled) and Vancouver (26% mislabelled).
- Oceana Canada's national investigation into seafood fraud—the most comprehensive study of its kind conducted in Canada—found farmed fish served up as wild caught; cheaper species substituted for more expensive ones; fish banned in many countries because of health risks

masquerading as another species; and exposed rampant problems with the current traceability and labelling standards for fish in Canada.

Montreal investigation results

- In July 2019, Oceana Canada tested 90 seafood samples from 50 grocery stores and restaurants in Montreal, Canada's second largest city, and found that a shocking 61 per cent were a substituted species or didn't meet the labelling requirements set out by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).
- Oceana Canada's team visited a range of locations, including some of Montreal's busiest grocery stores and most popular seafood restaurants, obtaining samples from: 18 grocery stores (29 samples) and 33 restaurants (61 samples).
- Sixty-one per cent of the samples collected – 55 out of 90 – were mislabelled in some way. Of these:
 - 34.4 per cent were a different species entirely (31 samples)
 - 23.3 per cent were mislabelled according to Canadian labelling standards (the English or French common name on the label didn't correspond with the acceptable market name for that species on CFIA's *Fish List*) (21 samples)
 - 3.3 % were species that are not authorized for sale in Canada (3 samples)
- Mislabelling was found in 74% of restaurant samples (45 out of 61) and 34% of grocery store samples (10 out of 29)

Canadians want the government to take action

In 2019, Oceana commissioned an Abacus Data public opinion survey which showed that:

- 75 per cent of Canadians are concerned about seafood fraud.
- 81 per cent think seafood products sold in Canada should require the same information as our trading partners.
- 78 per cent of Montrealers are concerned about buying species that are endangered, threatened, or vulnerable to overfishing as a result of seafood fraud.

Testing approach

- The samples were independently analyzed by TRU-ID, a commercial lab in Guelph, Ontario. The lab uses DNA barcoding, a genetic technique pioneered at the University of Guelph, to determine the species' identity. The species name was then compared to the corresponding market name(s) on CFIA's *Fish List* for that species.
- The *Fish List* includes the acceptable names for labelling all seafood imported into Canada or produced by a CFIA-registered establishment. If the sample's market name was on the list, it was considered correctly labelled. This is the same methodology used by CFIA in its own studies of seafood mislabelling and by previous studies across Canada.

Solutions

The federal government has a responsibility to combat this widespread problem. There is a solution.

- **Trace all seafood from boat to plate:** The federal government must commit to putting a traceability system in place that requires key information to follow all seafood products throughout the supply chain, from the boat or farm to the point of final sale, whether that's a restaurant, a grocery store or a fish market. This information should include the who, what, where, when and how of fishing, processing and distribution.
- **Require catch documentation:** Fisheries and Oceans Canada (DFO) and CFIA must work together to require catch documentation for all domestic and imported seafood, in line with what is currently required by the EU and recommended by the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization, which Canada agreed to support at the G7 Summit in 2018.
- **Introduce traceability verification measures:** CFIA must introduce DNA testing for species authentication into its inspection program. It should incorporate inspection, verification and enforcement measures at levels high enough to deter fraud.
- **Improve consumer information:** CFIA's labelling standards must be brought in line with those used in the EU and include essential information such as the scientific species name, whether the fish was wild caught or farmed, where it came from (geographic origin) and the type of fishing gear used.
- Canadians can add their name to Oceana Canada's petition urging CFIA to take the lead on implementing full boat-to-plate traceability and #StopSeafoodFraud at oceana.ca/StopSeafoodFraud.