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Science

What's REALLY in your sushi? Study finds almost half of fish are mislabeled in restaurants

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* Study found 47% of fish used by sushi restaurants were mislabeled

* Halibut and red snapper were mislabeled 100% of the time

* Bluefin tuna was the only fish found to have the correct label

The spicy tuna in your sushi roll might actually be a fraud, researchers have revealed.

A new study found nearly half of fish sold at more than two dozen sushi restaurants in the Los Angeles area were mislabeled.

Researchers say the problem could be bad translation - or a deliberate attempt to defraud restaurants buying the fish.

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MISLABELED FISH

The University of California Los Angeles and Loyola Marymount University conducted a 4 year study that revealed 47% of restaurants and 42% of grocery stores in Los Angeles mislabel the fish served in sushi.

The team investigated 9 types of fish and found all were mislabeled at least once.

It may be caused by the fish's name being lost in translation or mislabeled in the country of origin and she encourages sushi lovers to ask where the fish comes from and its specific species.

The list includes:

Red snapper

Yellowtail

Halibut

Mackerel

Salmon

Albacore

Yellowfin

Bigeye

Bluefin

'The results of this study raise new questions about the efficacy of efforts intended to stem seafood fraud,' said co-author Samantha Cheng, a postdoctoral fellow at NCEAS who conducted the research as part of her graduate studies at University of California Los Angeles (UCLA).

'Time and again, we found one variety or even an entirely different species to be labeled as a different, more commonly known or popular fish.'

The investigative study was conducted by marine scientists from UCLA and Loyola Marymount University (LMU) from 2012 to 2015 that included 26 restaurants and 3 high-end grocery stores.

The team targeted popular fish used for sushi, including red snapper, yellowtail, halibut, mackerel, salmon and four varieties of tuna: albacore, yellowfin, bigeye and bluefin.

Nearly 300 students from UCLA were asked to help uncover just how misleading the labels are by ordering the targeted fish at restaurants or buying them from high-end grocery stores – samples were then taken to the lab for DNA analysis.

During the study, researchers found that all of the restaurant served at least one type of fish that was mislabeled.

They also found that all of the targeted fish were mislabeled at least once, with the exception of bluefin tuna.

However, the team discovered that all menu items that claimed to contain red snapper or halibut were in fact a different kind of fish.

Mislabeled was slightly lower at the high-end grocery stores (42 percent) than at sushi restaurants (47 percent).

Cheng speculated that the fish's name may be lost in translation or is mislabeled in the country of origin - she encourages sushi lovers to ask where the fish comes from and its specific species.

Not only does this error mislead customers, but it can also have an impact on public health.

In 2007, pufferfish were being sold on the market as monk fish and led to consumers being hospitalized in three states, as many people have specific reactions to certain types of fish.

THE REAL COST OF YOUR SUSHI

Professor Daniel Pauly and Dr Dirk Zeller, from the University of British Columbia, in Canada, who published a respected study last year on the global fish catch, say bluefin and yellowfin tuna populations are at 'crisis' levels.

Both men blame the stock depletion on tuna's reputation as a source of heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

Speaking in advance of a lecture at the Zoological Society of London last night, Professor Pauly said: 'Historically we have had the 'Popeye effect' where everyone ate spinach, then vitamin D was good and vitamin C would save us from having cancer.

'Now it is omega-3 – all these things are going to save us, make us healthy and we are going to live for ever. None of this is true – what we need is a balanced diet.'

The professor also said he was confident the tuna served up in sushi bars contains plastic microbeads, found in cosmetic products including make-up and deodorants.

The microscopic plastic particles, set to be banned in the UK following a Daily Mail campaign, are magnets for pesticides and industrial chemicals.

He added: 'Microbeads are poison pills which soak up all the pollutants and they are consumed by little fish which are then eaten by tuna.'

Bluefin tuna tends to be in luxury sushi served in high-end Japanese restaurants, while a cheaper lunchtime supermarket sushi roll is likely to contain yellowfin tuna.

Most sushi eaten in the UK comes from the Indian Ocean, and tuna is routinely overfished to meet global demand.

Professor Pauly warned: 'We are in permanent crisis if you look at it in historic terms. Bluefin tuna was extremely abundant, especially in the Mediterranean.

'What has become of that? We have 2 to 3 percent of what we had 200 years ago.'

There are also cases where pregnant women and children are instructed to avoid high-mercury fish.

'Finding that nearly a third of the halibut sushi examined were in fact olive flounder, a species that has caused rampant outbreaks of parasitic infections in Japan, is very concerning,' Cheng explained.

The US federal government is aware of the issue and released new seafood labeling and fish trade requirements in December 2016.

And the Obama administration on Jan. 9, 2017, issued new rules aimed at preventing unverifiable seafood from entering the U.S. market.

'These are important first steps,' Cheng said.

'But much more needs to be done to increase advocacy, detection and enforcement to prevent seafood fraud.

'The public deserves to know what they are eating.

'Particularly as sustainable foods are becoming more mainstream, consumers need to know whether their choices are adding pressure to already over harvested fisheries.'

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