

# takepart

## Buying Seafood? It's Probably Not What You Think It Is

Oceana's new study finds that, amongst other frauds, nearly three-quarters of the sushi tested was mislabeled.



*One filet is rockfish, one is red snapper. Can you tell the difference? (Photo: Oceana)*



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Clare Leschin-Hoar's stories on seafood and food politics have appeared in *Scientific American*, *Eating Well* and elsewhere.

It makes no difference if you're in the Pacific Northwest, mighty New England, or on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico: There's a very real possibility that sooner or later you're going to be snookered when it comes to seafood. How that happens could vary. Maybe that tasty red snapper sandwich you ordered was made with farm-raised tilapia instead. Your crispy grouper taco may actually be pangasius (Asian catfish) in disguise. And that crazy-good deal you got on wild Alaskan salmon? If it was too good to be true, you probably ended up with farm-raised salmon for supper instead.

America has a pervasive seafood fraud problem. That's the latest findings by [Oceana](#), an environmental group that's been investigating seafood mislabeling and fraud since 2010, and is an issue we've warned you about

before. How widespread is it? After collecting data from over 1,200 seafood samples taken from 674 retail outlets in cities including Boston, New York, Chicago, Portland, Kansas City, Austin and more, the results are in, and they're not pretty.

“Everywhere we went to look for seafood fraud we found it,” Beth Lowell, director for Oceana’s Stop Seafood Fraud campaign, tells TakePart. “It occurs in about one-third of the seafood we tested. If you think about that, that’s huge.”

Indeed. Americans eat approximately 4.5 billion pounds of seafood a year, and 84 percent of that is imported. Once seafood is harvested, it can change hands numerous times before it’s sold to the end consumer. So pinning down exactly where fraud originates—at the docks, the wholesale level or in the kitchen—can be tricky. And because Oceana tested samples at the point-of-sale only, it’s chosen not to publicly name restaurants or stores where fish was sampled for this report.

“What is clear,” says Lowell, “is that the amount of mislabeling that’s occurring shows this is no clerical error.”

What was especially noticeable in the newest Oceana report was how uniform the findings were. Regardless of location, sushi joints were a consistent source of seafood fraud. Oceana found that 74 percent of the seafood tested from sushi restaurants were mislabeled. On the other end of the spectrum, grocery stores had the least number of incidences of mislabeled fish—only 18 percent of the samples were incorrectly labeled. Restaurants fell in the middle, with 38 percent of the seafood tested confirmed to be mislabeled.

Is the fact that mislabeling occurs most often at sushi restaurants related to cultural issues or a language barrier? Lowell says it doesn’t matter.

“In order to sell seafood in the U.S. you have to follow [FDA acceptable market names](#), no matter what restaurant or which region. Everything is supposed to be labeled by the acceptable market names. It is part of doing business under U.S. law. Regardless of if it’s cultural or not, you have to follow these naming guidelines,” she says.

The problem of seafood fraud has caught the attention of U.S. Senator Mark Begich (D-Alaska), who says he will be introducing federal seafood traceability legislation in the next few weeks.

“The whole issue of seafood fraud isn’t new,” Begich tells TakePart. “In Alaska, we’ve been seeing it with the king crab. Russian crab is coming into the markets and is being labeled Alaskan crab. This is a continued problem. Seafood branding is important. We have Gulf shrimp, Maine lobster, Alaskan salmon, and American jobs that are attached to it. Foreign processors are dumping [seafood] into the American market, driving down the prices, labeling it an American product, and it’s inferior in quality. This is why we think it’s important to put it on the table,” he says.

Gavin Gibbons, spokesperson for the National Fisheries Institute, a trade organization, says that fraud is a concern—and is why the Institute formed its [Better Seafood Board](#)—but adds that more legislation is not the solution.

“This is not about needing more laws, it is about needing more enforcement,” he tells us. “The FDA already has the mandate to enforce antifraud efforts. The Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act mandates that the FDA take steps to eliminate misbranded or adulterated foods. We don’t need new laws, we need a new focus on enforcement.”

So what’s a seafood-lover to do? Lowell says concerned shoppers should support traceability efforts. Groups like [Gulf Wild](#) or Rhode Island’s [Trace and Trust](#), which trace seafood from the boat to the plate, are great examples of such programs. Furthermore, consumers should look for country of origin

labeling at the grocery store. Ask your fishmonger, your server, your sushi chef when and where the fish was caught. If you're not getting answers, consider choosing something else.

And don't expect the issue to vanish anytime soon. Lowell says the latest report is not the last of Oceana's seafood fraud work.

"It's just the beginning. It's clear we need to change the way we deal with seafood and the seafood supply. Being able to trace the fish from boat to plate will allow less opportunity for fraud to occur, and will keep illegally caught fish out of the U.S. market," she says.