

MARCH 23, 2016

China's 'chaotic' domestic cod market rife with mislabeling, false claims

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China has been awash lately with cod and sable fish (the Mandarin name for both is interchangeable) which is being marketed as a health food.

Unfortunately, many unscrupulous traders had been taking advantage of a lack of knowledge among consumers to pass off ordinary pollock as sable fish and Alaskan cod.

At least, that's the interpretation of one China's most influential newspapers, which recently published an extensive report on pricing and mislabeling in the cod sector.

China's media traditionally has a consumers' rights campaign each March and, this year, malfeasance around cod was a subject of investigation of the Ji Lu Evening News, which focuses on the country's east coast in the region encompassing Qingdao, Jinan and Yantai, all major fishing ports and seafood processing hubs.

Consumers are being ripped off by overpriced "fake" cod, according to the Evening News report. The report slammed "confusion" and "chaos" caused by mislabeling in the trade as demand for cod as a health food rises among middle-class Chinese.

One major problem in China is a lack of standardization or credible certification. Chinese fresh markets, supermarkets and online stores use an infuriating variety of names for cod; the Ji Lu Evening News points to terms like "Alaska cod fish," "frozen true cod," "frozen pollock" and "frozen water cod."

There's a vast gulf in prices between individual cod products, but there's no credible way of knowing that you're paying for what you get. The Evening News quoted prices from a supermarket in Jinan city: these range from CNY 19 (USD 2.93, EUR 2.61) per 500g of "cold water cod steak" while similarly "frozen cod filet" for CNY 22.8 (USD 3.52, EUR 3.13) /500g came from a processing factory in nearby Rongcheng. But

then “deep sea cod” from New Zealand sells for CNY 60 (USD 9.25, EUR 8.23) per 500g while “Norwegian cod” at CNY 46 (USD 7.09, EUR 6.31) compares to CNY 188 (USD 28.99, EUR 26.80) /500g for “silver cod” – origin unknown.

Much of the product being labeled cod is in fact the same pollock that goes into fish burgers which are sold for CNY12 (USD 1.85, EUR 1.65) in fast food outlets across Beijing, according to the Ji Lu report. The newspaper also claims that fish normally used in Europe for making fish oil is sold in China as high-end cod and quotes prominent Chinese celebrity Ma Yili, who complained recently on her Weibo social media that her child got sick from eating “oily fish” sold as cod.

Chinese consumers have in recent years been sold cod as a health fix: marketing efforts focus on cod as a provider of nutrients for infants and the elderly. Fully aware of the willingness of Chinese parents to spend generously on infant care, some vendors use popular online portals like Taobao.com, Tmall.com and JD.com to market imported ‘silver cod’ and ‘black cod’ as a health fix for everything from skin problems to brittle bones to hair loss. Some cod vendors claim endorsement from doctors– who, upon investigation, turn out to be fakes, according to the Ji Lu report.

There’s also much mislabeling on geographic origins. SeafoodSource has for several years noted the profusion of French sable fish on Chinese e-commerce portals. France isn’t known as a source of cod but the French label on any product commands a premium in China.

A new advertising law that entered force last year in China was supposed to crack down on mislabelling and misinformation in order to protect consumers. Workers at online portals told SeafoodSource they’re making an effort to weed out misinformation, but the sheer volume of product sold makes their job very difficult in the absence of a specific complaint. Making matters worse, cutthroat competition has resulted in a reduction in quality control staffing at the online shopping sites.

There is much at stake here for legitimate seafood importers and traders who are benefiting from genuine Chinese demand for high quality cod. One sentence in the Ji Lu report is particularly worrying: “According to insiders the cod market is very chaotic... they say ‘shoddy’ and ‘deceptive’ traders are the main problem.”

International marketing agencies like the Norwegian Seafood Council have spent a fortune creating a market for premium products like salmon and cod in China. But China’s well-proven track record for doctored and fake food stuffs could do serious damage to the local perception of cod.

Of course it could also mean that local consumers will try even harder to get their hands on genuine, quality product. Proving products are the real deal and ensuring logos and branding aren't counterfeited by unscrupulous players are major challenges to seafood professionals doing business in China.
