



Chilean sea bass

Despite tighter controls, sought-after toothfish still faces reputation challenges

BY MELISSA WOOD

It's advice so easy to remember it rhymes: "Pass on Chilean sea bass." It's the title of an article from *Good Housekeeping's* "one easy thing" collection of tips for readers wishing to save the planet, effortlessly.

The article echoes Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch red-listing of the species, and may have been inspired by the decade-old "Take a Pass on Chilean Sea Bass" campaign. And back then it was probably true. Chilean sea bass' home in the deep Southern Ocean waters off Antarctica made it hard to track as a variety of countries

targeted it and exported it to distant markets.

But one downfall of getting information from the Internet is that yesterday's news can live on forever. Seafood Watch amended its 2006 report on Chilean sea bass last year to OK product with a Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) label. Those fish come from limited fisheries in the South Georgia-Ross Sea region and most recently the Australian Heard Island and McDonald Islands, which earned MSC certification in March.

The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR), which oversees fisheries management in the

Southern Ocean, began requiring mandatory electronic catch documentation in 2007. Vessels catching toothfish also have their positions monitored by satellite every four hours. The measures have helped tightened control over who catches Chilean sea bass (the U.S. name for both the Patagonian toothfish and Antarctic toothfish) and its far-flung market destinations.

"There is some misinformation out there. A lot of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have listed toothfish as endangered on their sites, but it's not endangered," says Kim Dawson-Guynn, a NOAA Fisheries biologist at the National Seafood Inspection Laboratory in Pascagoula, Miss.

Dawson-Guynn is the sitting chair for a CCAMLR subcommittee on implementation and works with toothfish importers, whose product must be pre-approved 15 days before entering the United States. She says import numbers have been steady, with 8,000 metric tons in 2010.

The difference between paper-based and electronic documentation is like night and day, she says. It may take three years to reconcile a catch sent around the world with paper-based tracking, and by then, you could end up with results showing three times the fish being exported than was legally caught.

With the electronic system, the catch that is exported is taken off the record instantly, and once you reach the catch maximum you can't create another import document.

"It's almost impossible to import something within the electronic system that's fraudulent," says Dawson-Guynn.

Chilean sea bass' reputation lives on, however. In April high-end retailer Whole Foods Market announced that it would only carry

Electronic documentation has tightened control over the Chilean sea bass trade.

MSC-labeled Chilean sea bass, and last month Federated Co-operatives Ltd., a 165-supermarket chain in western Canada, removed the species from its shelves after initiating a sustainable seafood sourcing program. Eastern Overseas Marketing in Plainview, N.Y., had developed a Chilean sea bass product for Costco, which never materialized after the retailer decided it would only accept MSC-certified fish. And wholesale prices typically exceed \$15 a pound.

Despite these challenges, David Cohen, president of Eastern Overseas, says sea bass sales have been rising.

"We've developed our East-Over brand that has very much taken the market by storm in the portions and the fillet forms," he says.

Kendell Seafood in East Greenwich, R.I., traces its fish using software called G-Force, which includes a photo record of the product's on-shore history.

"This system gives you complete proof of sustainability," says company President Michael Dellagrotta.

Kendell also puts a barcode on boxes it sells to wholesalers and chefs that gives buyers the registration number of the fishing vessel that caught the fish, where it was caught and the plant it was packed in.

An importer of toothfish for 14 years, Dellagrotta believes a lot of the press the fish receives is based on outdated information.

"I truly believe that there are no IUU (illegal, unreported and unregulated) Chilean sea bass coming into the United States," he says.

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