



Size matters

Trend of small fillets threatens fish population

Bigger isn't necessarily better when it comes to catching, selling and eating fish.

For certain snappers, in fact, a market preference for plate-size whole fillets is driving fishermen to target smaller fish. For some wild fish populations, this is a recipe for collapse.

"The preferred size of a fillet in the U.S. market corresponds to juvenile fish that haven't had a chance to reproduce," said conservation biologist Peter Mous, director of The Nature Conservancy's Indonesia Fisheries Conservation Program. "A lot of species here are heavily overfished, and this demand for small fillets is making things worse."

by
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Of particular concern for conservationists are such species as Malabar snapper. Mous said this fish becomes sexually mature at 4 pounds and can grow as large as 29 pounds—but global restaurant and retail markets prefer to buy it at 2 pounds and as small as 1 pound.

"For a large species like giant ruby snapper, the differences are even more extreme," Mous wrote in an email. "The trade buys them at 1 pound, but they only become adults at nine pounds, while [they] can grow to 73 pounds."

The reproductive patterns and growth rates of these fish vary widely, but with virtually all species, the market prefers what are essentially baby fish. He says many snapper species already have been depleted to an estimated 10 percent of their unfished biomass—a term that refers to a population's total mass, rather than the number of individuals.

Mous' organization is trying to change the industry by encouraging seafood buyers and exporters to commit to purchasing only fish greater than a certain minimum size. This would motivate fishermen to catch bigger snappers and leave the juveniles in the water, allowing the fish to eventually reproduce and help replenish their population.

The campaign is gaining some traction. Norpac Fisheries Export, which sells to Safeway, Costco and other companies, signed on to the campaign in January, and a few weeks later, Netuno USA, the largest importer of frozen snapper in the U.S., followed suit.

Rachel Winters, associate director of media relations for The Nature Conservancy, said eight more distributors have since announced their commitment to the fishery plan, including five that made the pledge March 17, in Boston, Mass., on the first day of Seafood Expo North America.

The demand for smaller fish seems to be coming mainly from the American retail and restaurant market, where many chefs and large-scale caterers tend to prefer not only whole intact fillets, but fillets that, on their own, perfectly constitute a single portion.

"Chefs prefer fish where the fillet size is ready to serve," explained Christian Monchâtre, a Paris-born chef who has worked for more than 20 years at restaurants in Europe, Mexico and California. "It's cost-effective—you don't have extra scraps where you have to develop other recipes in order to use them." Monchâtre said chefs who wind up with larger-than-optimal fillets "lose money with every serving."

While whole fillets are a visually appealing and very popular serving style, so is a whole fish, said Andre Brugger, the sustainability compliance and quality assurance manager at Netuno USA.

"A lot of places serve a whole snapper, and to fit it on the plate and for it to serve two people, it can't be a huge fish," Brugger said. He added that the demand for small and uniform fish fillets is strongest in situations in which a chef or restaurant is serving large numbers of people, as on cruise lines or in hotel restaurants.

Thomas Kraft, founder of Norpac Fisheries Export, says "standardization makes industries more cost-effective." But in the case of wild fish, breaking away from industry norms could be critical for sustaining the Indonesian snapper industry. Kraft expects that chefs, acting as role models and even celebrities, will be pivotal in changing the market and, eventually, motivating fishermen to try to catch more mature snappers.

"This needs to come down from the top," he said.

Brugger sees the same path forward. Eventually, a shift in demand from chefs and retailers will reach the water level, and fishermen, he says, will respond.

"They'll go somewhere else to catch bigger fish," he said.

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