

# Choosing Healthy, Sustainable Seafood

BY ELI PENBERTHY

Choosing seafood that is both sustainable and healthy can be challenging. Is it farmed or wild? Troll-caught or trawled? Alaskan or Chilean? Healthy or toxic? There are so many questions, enough to confuse even the most conscientious consumer. As retailers, we can make it easier

At PCC Natural Markets, our customers trust that we provide only seafood from environmentally sustainable fisheries—and that we don't carry seafood with unsafe levels of PCBs, mercury, or other contaminants. We consult with the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) to ensure our seafood meets strict environmental and health standards. We make sure our seafood suppliers agree to meet these standards by asking them to sign affidavits.

All our fresh, canned, jarred, and frozen seafood comply with Seafood Watch guidelines. This means it's caught or harvested in environmentally friendly ways that avoid habitat destruction and wasteful "bycatch"—and that stocks are strong, not threatened by overfishing.

We mostly carry wild seafood, much of it from the Pacific Northwest. But we also carry some farmed seafood that's sustainable according to Seafood Watch standards—including filter-feeding species such as mussels, clams, and oysters, as well as some trout and catfish.

Greenpeace USA has ranked top retailers in the country on their seafood sustainability in



Seafood remains the "wild west" of food oversight, says Eli Penberthy.

its "Carting Away the Oceans" report, now in its seventh edition. It found marked improvements in the sustainability policies and practices among even the largest retailers, reflecting growing consumer awareness about the importance of knowing how and where seafood was caught.

PCC consistently has been rated the top retailer for sustainable seafood in the country by Greenpeace USA.

As cooperatives, it's our responsibility not only to set a clear, manageable policy and to source sustainable seafood for our stores, but also to support legislation and global efforts to help turn the tide on major problems facing our oceans and waterways. Following are some things we can do to ensure sustainable, healthy seafood is available for generations to come.

## Set a seafood policy

PCC has partnered with the Seafood Watch program since 2004. The Seafood Watch team of scientists evaluates fisheries around the world and rates seafood as Red (Avoid), Yellow (Good Alternative), or Green (Best Choice) for sustainability. Green choices are abundant, well-managed, and caught or farmed in environmentally friendly ways. Yellow choices are an option, but there are concerns with how they're caught or farmed and concerns with the health of their habitat due to other human impacts. Red items are caught or farmed in ways that harm other marine life or the environment.

Our partnership with Seafood Watch means we've agreed never to sell "red" seafood in our stores. This clear policy makes it easy for us to choose what seafood to carry. Our distributors know we won't accept anything not on the "green" or "yellow" lists. We have handy Seafood Watch "pocket guides"

## Seafood articles from PCC's *Sound Consumer*

One way PCC educates consumers about sustainable seafood is through its monthly newspaper, the *Sound Consumer*. Here's a sampling of articles published over the past few years:

**Shoppers can help save marine mammals** [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1403/shoppers-can-help-save-marine-mammals.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1403/shoppers-can-help-save-marine-mammals.html)

**The cost of tuna** [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1207/cost\\_tuna.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1207/cost_tuna.html)

**What shrimp is sustainable?** [http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1306/sustainable\\_shrimp.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1306/sustainable_shrimp.html)

**Water out of fish: Are we overfishing our oceans?** [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1207/overfishing\\_oceans.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1207/overfishing_oceans.html)

**Offshore fish farming: The selling of common waters** [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/0504/sc0504-fishfarming.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/0504/sc0504-fishfarming.html)

**Tell FDA not to approve GE salmon!** [www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1302/fda\\_ge\\_salmon.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/sc/1302/fda_ge_salmon.html)

## Current labeling laws simply don't suffice. The result is information that can be confusing, misleading, and incomplete.

([www.seafoodwatch.org/cr/cr\\_seafoodwatch/download.aspx](http://www.seafoodwatch.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/download.aspx)) and our own brochure, "Healthy and sustainable seafood"

([www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/guides/tips\\_seafoodguide.html](http://www.pccnaturalmarkets.com/guides/tips_seafoodguide.html)) at the seafood counters in our stores to help customers make decisions while shopping.

### Quality over quantity

Most retailers have giant seafood cases and aisles stocked with many choices. At PCC, selling only sustainable seafood means we have a smaller selection. You won't find imported shrimp, for instance, which is linked to massive environmental destruction and human rights abuses, and comes from industrial shrimp farms so crowded and unsanitary that producers use pesticides, antibiotics, and other chemicals (many of them banned in the United States) to prevent disease. (See sidebar link: "What shrimp is sustainable?")

You also won't find farmed salmon. These non-native, invasive fish compete for food and spawning territory with local wild fish and carry potentially epidemic parasites and pathogens.

Our tuna selection is trimmed, too. A few years ago, we reviewed every can of tuna on our shelves and discontinued species and brands that didn't meet our standards. The sustainability of tuna is determined by its specific geography, the fishing method, and the species. (See sidebar link: "The cost of tuna.") PCC discontinued brands that did not meet the same sustainability standards as our fresh seafood. Gone were some brands of albacore, yellowfin, and tongol tuna.

We used this shelf-clearing as an opportunity to source more local and sustainable varieties, including several brands of pole-caught Pacific Northwest albacore. Not only are these "green" choices, they're also lower in mercury and higher in heart-healthy omega-3 fats.

### Think beyond fresh

Many shoppers assume fresh is always best, but at PCC we tout the benefits of canned, jarred, and frozen seafood. It can be as good or better than fresh. Canned tuna, salmon, anchovies, and sardines are less expensive than fresh or frozen, available year-round, and convenient for quick, easy meals. Anchovies and sardines have even more omega-3 fatty acids than salmon.

Frozen fish often is overlooked, too. Research shows frozen fish may have a smaller carbon footprint than fresh because it can be transported by freighter or train, which use less fossil fuel than planes. Also, it retains its fresh flavor because it's frozen right at the source.

### Fight fraud and support traceability

One of the hardest things about being a seafood retailer is how difficult it can be to trace seafood back to the source. We have paper trails all the way back to the farm for our organic meat, dairy, and produce, so why don't we have the same protections in place for seafood? Seafood remains the "wild west" of food oversight.

To make ecologically sound purchasing decisions, retailers and consumers need detailed information at the point of sale. But current labeling laws simply don't suffice. The result is information that can be confusing, misleading, and incomplete.

Inaccurate or incomplete labeling can easily be used to hide rampant fraudulent practices, such as species substitution—in fact, recent studies have identified fraud in up to 70 percent of cases involving particularly vulnerable species such as snapper and salmon. This means consumers frequently pay for one kind of fish but get a completely different species that's generally less sustainable and of lower quality and more questionable origins. Failing to crack down on such behavior encourages illegal, unreported, and unregulated "pirate" fishing, one of the greatest threats to our oceans.

The best way to end this problem is to stop illegal and fraudulent seafood before it enters the U.S. market. The "Carting Away the Oceans" report says currently less than 2 percent of all seafood imported into the United States is inspected, and only a fraction of that is analyzed for fraud and illegality.

The Safety and Fraudulent Enforcement for Seafood (SAFE Seafood) Act, H.R. 1012/S. 520, would fight fraud. The bill would standardize seafood names, stop mislabeled seafood at the border before it enters the U.S. market, and require all seafood entering the U.S. be traceable to its catch areas and come with other pieces of information such as catch method. The bill was introduced more than a year ago and referred to committee.

As retailers, we can fight fraud by asking for detailed traceability records from trusted suppliers. This year, a few of our conscientious vendors, including Woods Fisheries, which provides PCC's wild American shrimp, have implemented explicit traceability measures voluntarily. We need to support suppliers who make traceability a priority. We also can support

the larger traceability movement by asking our policymakers to pass legislation such as the SAFE Seafood Act.

### Think beyond your store

Traceability is just one of many serious seafood issues on which we as retailers should take a public stand. At PCC, we frequently advocate to legislators and other policymakers on a range of issues.

Recently, we've testified before the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to oppose a proposed mine in Bristol Bay, Alaska, home of one of the largest wild salmon runs in the world. We've also testified before the National Organic Standards Board to advocate stronger proposed rules for "organic" aquaculture (current standards are weak and have not yet been adopted by the National Organic Program).

We've written to President Obama calling for a more effective plan for Northwest salmon and steelhead recovery, and to the Food and Drug Administration opposing the agency's recommendation to approve genetically engineered salmon.

In other words, we think it's important to keep our finger on the pulse of what's happening with seafood nationally and globally and to take action on issues that impact the environment, consumer health—and ultimately, our bottom line. Retailers hold a lot of sway in policy decisions and have a stake in their outcome.

At PCC, we think it's important to keep our shoppers and 53,000 members informed and give them an opportunity to be part of our advocacy efforts. Our co-op newspaper, the *Sound Consumer*, frequently covers seafood and ocean issues. We also send occasional email news alerts called "PCC Advocates" to members, explaining opportunities to take action. We've urged our shoppers to take action on issues ranging from opposition to genetically engineered salmon to banning open-ocean fish farming in local waters.

### The bottom line

You may wonder if setting such high standards for seafood sustainability and health has meant our co-op's bottom line has suffered. The answer is, absolutely not. In the years since we adopted a formal sustainability policy for our seafood, from 2005 to 2013, sales in that department have grown 200 percent.

We've proven that doing the right thing for the environment and consumer health is a profitable business model. This only will become more evident as consumer concern about the environmental and health impacts of seafood continues to grow. ■