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MailOnline

'Pilchards' and 'slimehead' fish renamed to boost popularity

By VANESSA ALLEN

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Invite the average shopper to tuck into pilchards and the response is likely to be a swift: "No thank you".

Yet describe the same dish as Cornish sardines and they will be eagerly snapped up by health-conscious customers keen to enjoy the benefits of eating oily fish.

Marks & Spencer has seen a sales boom in fresh pilchards by the simple expedient of giving them the new name - dispelling memories of the mushy tinned product in tomato sauce.

And around the country fishmongers and restaurants are having similar success by replacing traditional names such as rat-tails and witch with the less off-putting grenadier and Torbay sole.

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The fish formerly known as slimehead: Orange roughy is enjoying a sales boom

Faced with dangerously low stocks of traditional favourites such as cod because of over-fishing, the industry is desperate to tempt consumers to try lesser-known species.

So the slimehead is now orange roughy, and Patagonian toothfish sells better as Chilean sea bass.

An M & S spokesman said of the rebranding: "It's a good way to encourage people to try different types of fish as part of our sustainable fish policy."

Fishermen have long argued that traditional names such as slimehead have - understandably - deterred shoppers from trying something new.

They have been behind other changes such as rockfish being sold as Pacific red snapper, and dogfish as rock salmon, and there are moves to have the megrim renamed as Cornish sole.

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The witch fish is being rebranded as Torbay sole while pilchards are selling well as Cornish sardines

Conservationists back moves to encourage shoppers away from over-fished species including monkfish and sole, and say the consumer can play a vital role in reversing the decline of fish stocks by choosing not to buy those at risk.

Conscientious shoppers have been advised to try coley, gurnard and cape hake as alternatives.

The TV chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, who has just written a book on fish, said renaming species might encourage customers to be more adventurous and steer clear of endangered stocks.

But there have also been complaints that the demand for some species has led to deliberate mislabelling. Genetic analysis on fish being sold as red snapper found that up to 70 per cent was in fact other species.

And researchers from the University of British Columbia found that more than 200,000 tons of farmed salmon was sold worldwide as the much more expensive wild fish in the last 12 months.

Comments (10)

It would be better if they kept the slime head name and left it in the sea. Orange roughy is a fish that takes many years to grow; one that is big enough to fillet may well be over 15 years old. It can't be replaced at the rate it is harvested. Choose other fish.

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- Mary Morton, Sydney, Australia, 24/9/2007 13:54

The article mentions 'monkfish'. The monkfish sold in the shops is actually a shallow water 'angler fish' and one of the ugliest beasts around, most of it is mouth, the bit you eat is tail and only makes up about 20% of the fish's weight. A true monkfish is actually a species of shark called an 'angel shark'. It has a flattened body and is half way between a ray and a shark.

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- Ian, Lincoln, 24/9/2007 13:17

So what are they going to call sardines caught in Cornish waters?

Sea Bass used to be cheap here until Rick Stein started using it, then suddenly up goes the price! They have started to farm it, but if it's as awful as the majority of farmed salmon, flabby and full of chemicals, forget it.

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- Diana, England, 24/9/2007 12:54

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