



Too few residents taking advantage of local seafood bounty

Survey is start of efforts to encourage more consumption

By Judy Benson

Whether it's flounder, oysters, porgy or kelp, more of the seafood grown or landed in Connecticut should be ending up on the dinner plates of state residents.

After all, it's healthy, safe and harvested under rules to prevent species from being overfished.

"I would really like the public to know that Connecticut seafood is safe, healthy and nutritious," said Tessa Getchis, aquaculture extension specialist at Connecticut Sea Grant and UConn Extension. "We have an abundance of seafood here, but we're not eating enough of it to get the health benefits."

Getchis and colleagues around the state are working to remedy that, by providing health information about Connecticut seafood and surveying residents about local seafood consumption.

Nationally, efforts such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch listing have heightened awareness and interest in seafood that's raised and caught responsibly. While Seafood Watch labeling identifies species consumers should seek from those they should avoid in the global fisheries market, Connecticut residents don't have to wonder about local fish and shellfish.

"Everything that's being harvested in Connecticut has a management plan that ensures it's sustainable," Getchis said.

Consumers can also be confident about the safety of all the seafood coming out of Long Island Sound, with just a few exceptions, said Brian Toal, epidemiologist with the state Department of Public Health. Three top-of-the-food chain species – striped bass, bluefish and weakfish – can have high levels of PCBs, a probable carcinogen, and should be avoided by pregnant women and children, and eaten only infrequently by others, he said.

"But all other fish from Long Island Sound are safe to eat," he said. "Everybody should eat fish."

Toal oversees the health department's "If I Catch It, Can I Eat It?" recreational anglers guide and its companion for consumers, the *Fish Consumption Advisory*. Each year, state environmental regulators take a research vessel into Long Island Sound and set trawl nets to survey marine life. Edible fish harvested in the trawl surveys are then tested for contaminants, Toal said, and all the samples have shown very low levels except bluefish, striped bass and weakfish. Apart from the warnings about the three species, the advisory recommends adults eat two meals per week of salt water fish and shellfish, in keeping with federal nutrition advice. Seafood is a good source of lean protein and heart-healthy omega-3 fatty acids. But only 15 percent of Connecticut residents are eating the recommended amount. Half of state residents eat just one seafood meal per week, and the other half eats even less.

Those are two of the early findings of the Connecticut Seafood Survey, a major initiative Getchis and Anoushka Concepcion, assistant aquaculture extension specialist at Connecticut Sea Grant, are undertaking with two colleagues at UConn Extension. The purpose is both to learn what people already know about Connecticut seafood – from traditional offerings like clams and oysters to emerging products like kelp – and their level of interest in expanding their seafood horizons. A portion of a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration paid for the survey.

"We want to improve our understanding about how seafood products can be marketed, and whether people are willing to pay more for Connecticut seafood versus, (for example) West Coast seafood, or more for wild caught versus farm raised," said John Bovay, assistant professor and extension economist in the UConn Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics.

Bovay worked with the three others on the survey team to write the 88 questions in the survey, which was taken by 1,746 residents representative of the state's age, gender and income

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SURVEY RESULTS

Respondents:

- 80%** EAT FISH AND SHELLFISH
- 90%** INDICATED MODERATE OR EXTREME CONFIDENCE IN CONNECTICUT SEAFOOD
- 23%** PREFER CONNECTICUT SEAFOOD PRODUCTS
- 13%** HARVEST THEIR OWN FISH OR SHELLFISH
- 35%** EAT SEAWEED
- 25%** INTERESTED IN TRYING SEAWEED PRODUCTS
- 15%** EAT TWO MEALS OR MORE OF SEAFOOD PER WEEK
- 50%** EAT ONE MEAL OF SEAFOOD PER WEEK



health guidelines for growers and assisting them with regulatory aspects, the survey provided a chance to help the farmers in a new way.

“Growers had questions about the potential markets, and whether consumers are interested in purchasing raw kelp or something that’s processed,” through dehydration or freezing, she said. “In the survey, we asked consumers whether they’ve ever tried seaweed, or would be interested in trying seaweed with a list of products, and what they’d be willing to pay.”

Bovay said the survey also provided information about how Connecticut’s seafood industry contributes to the state’s economy, and the health and environmental benefits of locally grown

and harvested products. Questions were then posed to determine whether that information had a positive influence.

“We may find that we can use those kinds of messages with consumers,” he said.

Ultimately, the findings could lead to a labeling campaign to clearly identify Connecticut seafood, or other “sensible marketing strategies” to respond to consumer interests and benefit seafood growers and harvesters, said Bovay.

Added Getchis: “Connecticut fishermen and farmers take great pride in offering fresh, safe and nutritious seafood. We are striving to expand on that message. We think that each and every seafood consumer should know how Connecticut seafood is grown and harvested and its cultural and economic importance.”

For Concepcion, the survey is relevant to her work with the state’s nascent seaweed farming industry, which is now growing kelp in a half dozen sites in the Sound. While her projects focus on providing the scientific data needed to set public

Find out about the warnings on three Long Island Sound fish species in the *Fish Consumption Advisory* from the Connecticut Department of Public Health by visiting: <https://seagrant.uconn.edu/publications/wrack-lines/>