

US North Pacific Sablefish



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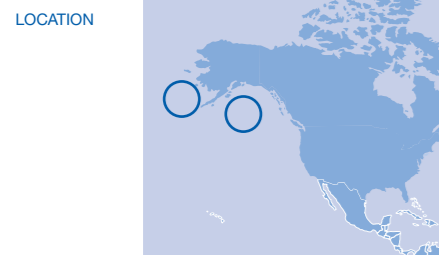


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SPECIES Sablefish
(*Anoplopoma fimbria*)

FISHING METHOD Bottom hook and line (longline)

COUNTRY United States



Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska, North Pacific

FISHERY TONNAGE 18,100 tonnes

COMMERCIALY KNOWN AS black cod, sablefish is not in fact a member of the cod family. Its flesh is white and flaky like cod, but oilier – giving it a rich, nutty flavour preferred by chefs and gourmets. According to The Young’s Lexicon of Fish, a comprehensive guide to flavour, it features “both a sweet artichoke-like note and an oily undertone not dissimilar to that of mackerel” which “works well with assertive herbs and spices”. Black cod marinated in miso is the signature dish of Japanese restaurateur and chef Nobu Matsuhisa, and 90 per cent of the catch from this fishery goes to Asia – especially Japan.

New markets

There, unlike most other markets, consumers buy sablefish not because it is sustainable – but because it is a delicacy. As a result, it has been harder to attribute new sales directly to the MSC programme. “Recently, for the first time, we had a group call and specifically say ‘We want MSC sablefish’,” says Bob Alverson, Executive Director of the Fishing Vessel Owners Association in Seattle. “We asked them, ‘Where is this fish going?’ and they said ‘It’s going to Spain.’ Black cod is becoming fashionable in Europe – and that is entirely due to the MSC.”

The fruits have been a long time coming – but tapping into new markets in Europe was one reason why Alverson decided, in 2004, to have this and the North Pacific halibut fishery certified to the MSC standard. “At that time, Europe was reacting far better to MSC product than the United States, where all this stuff was still very much in its infancy,” he explains. “Commercially and politically, we thought it would be a very good thing to have in our country.”

Sustainable fisheries management

While the US lagged behind Europe in terms of sales, in many areas it was

ahead in terms of fisheries management – particularly in Alaska. Since 1977, when the Magnuson Fishery Conservation and Management Act kicked in, stocks have been sustainably managed. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), which monitors and polices the fishery, reports that “sablefish population levels are high” and, depending on the area, are running at between 96 and 105 per cent of the population size required to maximise sustainable yield.

“We have an observer programme and a logbook system for bycatch,” says Alverson, and the gear type is highly selective due to the size of the hook and the fact that “half-skates”, the industry term for the 275m longlines used, are laid along the seabed only in known sablefish habitat. Quotas are allocated to individual vessels – and all landings are recorded using electronic cards. “When you deliver, you swipe your card on a machine that every buyer must have,” says Alverson, “and that logs in with the federal government.” Fishermen must alert the ‘transaction station’ six hours prior to their arrival, so NMFS officials can observe landings.

Political influence

“Given all this, we knew the fishery was sustainable even before certification,” Alverson says, “but being able to prove it is what matters.” For him, belonging to the MSC programme “is 15 per cent political,” he explains. “Right now, with the Obama administration wanting to be green, it is worth something to us to be able to go to Washington DC and say, ‘Oh, by the way, we have this MSC certification; we went through an independent analysis and they say we are doing everything right’.” Armed with such a tool, fishermen feel they will be listened to on issues that affect them. “From a political standpoint, our MSC certification is worth an awful lot to us,” Alverson says.

“Ninety per cent of our sablefish goes to Asia, mostly to Japan – where they are just beginning to be interested in MSC certification. Recently, for the first time, we had a group call and say, ‘We want MSC sablefish’. In Europe, they are demanding only MSC – which has helped us a lot”

Bob Alverson, Executive Director, Fishing Vessel Owners Association



“As a ‘wild-only’ seafood buyer, processor and marketer, Harbour Marine Products Inc has a vested interest in a healthy and sustainable fishing industry. MSC certification has opened up new commercial opportunities for us, including new value-added business. It is our MSC products that help differentiate us from the competition and show significant new volume potential. MSC is proving to be good for consumers, the supply chain, and the fisheries”

Ron F Habijanac, President and CEO, Harbour Marine Products Inc