

D.B. PLESCHNER: Some Inconvenient Truths about California Squid Marketing

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Read the original Paul Greenberg op-ed in the Los Angeles Times

August 5, 2014 (SeafoodNews.com) -- The following opinion piece appeared today on SeafoodNews.com:

In his op-ed to the Los Angeles Times last week, author Paul Greenberg could have dodged some critical misstatements and inaccuracies about the marketing of California squid - the state's largest catch.

All he had to do was check with local sources, including the California Wetfish Producers Association, which represents the majority of squid processors and fishermen in the Golden State and promotes California squid.

Instead, Greenberg missed the boat on a number of issues, including the overall carbon footprint of seafood, but equally important, the reasons why most of the squid that California exports is consumed overseas!

To set the record straight, here are some inconvenient truths you wouldn't know about squid by reading last week's op-ed:

First, size matters and price rules when it comes to California market squid, which are one of the smallest of more than 300 squid species found worldwide. The U.S. "local" market really prefers larger, "meatier" squid, notwithstanding Greenberg's 'locavore' movement.

Greenberg acknowledged the labor cost to produce cleaned squid in California adds at least \$1.50 per pound to the end product. In fact, local production costs double the price of cleaned squid, due to both labor (at least \$15 per hour with benefits) and super-sized overhead costs, including workers' comp, electricity, water and myriad other costs of doing business in the Golden State.

Del Mar Seafood is one processor in California that micro-processes cleaned squid at the request of markets like the CSA that Greenberg mentioned. In fact, virtually all California squid processors do the same thing at the request of their customers. But at 1,000 pounds per order, we would need 236,000 CSAs, restaurants or retail markets paying \$1.50 more per pound to account for the total harvest. If the demand were there, we'd be filling it!

Greenberg also misconstrued the issue of food miles. Respected researchers like Dr. Peter Tyedmers, from Dalhousie University in Canada, found that transport makes a minor contribution to overall greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, when considering the carbon footprint of seafood (or land-based foods). Mode of production is far more important.

Here's another surprise: California squid is one of the most efficient fisheries in the world - because a limited fleet harvests a lot of squid within a short distance of processing plants.

Studies show that the California wetfish fleet, including squid, can produce 2,000 pounds of protein for only 6 gallons of diesel. Squid are then flash frozen to preserve freshness and quality. Keep in mind that even with immaculate handling, fresh squid spoil in a few days.

As counterintuitive as it may seem, even with product block-frozen and ocean-shipped to Asia for processing, California's squid fishery is one of the 'greenest' in the world. One recent survey estimated that about 30 percent of California squid is now either processed here or transshipped to Asia for processing (other Asian countries besides China now do the work) and re-imported.

China, although important, is only one export market that craves California squid. With a growing middle class billions strong, Chinese consumers can now afford California squid themselves. Many countries that import California squid prefer the smaller size, and California squid goes to Mediterranean countries as well. In short, most of the squid that California's fishery exports are consumed overseas. Why? The U.S. palate for squid pales in comparison to Asian and European demand.

Also important to understand: California squid is the economic driver of California's wetfish industry - which produces more than 80 percent of the total seafood volume landed in the Golden State. California squid exports also represent close to 70 percent by weight and 44 percent of value of all California seafood exports. Our squid fishery contributes heavily to the Golden State's fishing economy and also helps to offset a growing seafood trade imbalance.

The sad reality is that price really does matter and most California restaurants and retail markets are not willing to pay double for the same - or similar - small squid that they can purchase for half the price.

Nonetheless, we do appreciate Greenberg's pitch for local seafood. Our local industry would be delighted if, as he suggested, all Californians would be willing to pay \$1.50 a pound more for California squid. We may be biased, but in our opinion California squid really is the best!

D.B. Pleschner is Executive Director of the California Wetfish Producers Association, a nonprofit designed to promote sustainable wetfish resources.



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