TONY'S SEAFOOD KATE MASURY

CONCLUSION

The Eat Like a Fish project was more than science. It was a six-month bonding experience among a far-flung group of individuals who shared a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. It was a unique profit opportunity for seafood business across the region, who made over a thousand sales of diverse seafood as a result of a project they didn't even sign up for. It was an inadvertent local seafood training experience, both for the citizen scientists who participated and for the people they touched: fishmongers, family members, and even co-workers who listened enviously to fantastic fish stories about dinner the night before. For many, it was their latest, and perhaps their greatest, personal contribution to a growing trend of knowing where seafood comes from and supporting local fisheries.

But at its heart, the project was about producing data to help seafood eaters, sellers, and promoters plot a course for achieving greater symmetry between the wild creatures in New England's ocean ecosystem and those found in its markets. Drawing on the rich and nuanced quantitative and qualitative data that citizen scientists produced, the project revealed many instructive takeaways to support this goal.

The project showed that many local species are remarkably hard to find in the marketplace. These species include some that are quite common in the local ocean ecosystem. Species experiencing this kind of mismatch should be the first priorities for a marketing boost. These species have the most to give from an economic benefit perspective, and balancing their harvest with their production can help alleviate impacts on marine food webs.

The project showed that for "early adopters" who wish to diversify their seafood diets by enjoying new local species, the low availability of many species makes it hard for them to satisfy this ambition. However, some markets stand out as paragons of local seafood diversity, setting an example for others to follow. These markets can act as magnets for early adopters and serve as trend setters in the industry.

The project highlighted the critical importance of the fishmonger-customer interaction as a point of mutual education and influence. When participants started asking questions about fish, it did not annoy most fishmongers, but instead led to improved communication, trust, and familiarity between buyers and sellers of local seafood. Enthusiastic fishmongers proved themselves to be invaluable resources, running the gamut from seeking out specific species for customers, to providing tips on using a new species, to scaling or filleting whole fish for squeamish customers. Fishmongers also put a "human face" to the fish and are in an excellent position to tell its "story."

On the flip side, citizen scientists taught their fishmongers some new things as well—perhaps most importantly, that local consumers are interested in purchasing a greater diversity of local seafood. Some citizen scientists even said that their exhortations were effective within the time frame of the study, as they saw local fishmongers begin to offer a greater number of species more regularly. In this way, the project affirmed that customers do need not be passive takers, but can be active makers, of the seafood system.

The project showed that when trying to market new or unfamiliar species, novelty can be both a draw and a drawback. Sometimes, eaters appreciate the opportunity to try something new, but at other times, they would prefer to eat something comfortable and familiar. To make "new" species attractive to everyone, it makes sense to play up the novelty factor while simultaneously drawing parallels between unfamiliar and familiar species in terms of their taste, texture, and recommended preparations.

The project showed that many of the species that are ecologically common but rare in the marketplace tend to be available as whole fish. It also showed that cooking with whole fish at home can be an experience that leads to excitement and empowerment or to intimidation and disgust. This key attitudinal difference among seafood lovers with regard to use of whole fish suggests the benefits of a two-pronged course of action for marketing. Whole fish cooking classes can raise interest and build skills among those who respond positively to whole fish, while investment in new processing technologies can make these same fish available to squeamish customers in pre-processed form without the mess.

The project showed the critical importance of skills building for both fishmongers and seafood eaters. A fish that is old due to inadequate monitoring in the seafood case or a fish that is or under- or overcooked due to the inexperience of a home cook can result in a meal that gives seafood eaters a bad first impression when trying a new species. For many eaters, once is enough to make up their minds about a species. Once turned off, they are often turned off for good. Training for fishmongers in proper handling procedures and seafood classes and videos for home cooks can help improve the seafood experience in general, while preempting consumers' tendency to shut the door on a new species simply because it was not handled or prepared correctly.

The project showed a high promise for social learning strategies when marketing diversity in seafood. The camaraderie and friendly competition established through the Eat Like a Fish Facebook group and Eating with the Ecosystem's weekly blog incentivized participants to keep searching for seafood and pushing their boundaries even after competing life priorities, frustration over "striking out" on finding fish, and the tedium of finding yet another fish scale on the kitchen floor had set in. Had these opportunities for engagement and support not existed, it seems likely that many participants would have dropped out before the end of the project. The fact that 86 people stuck with it for six long months is a testament to the power of group solidarity to motivate people. Getting social with seafood can help challenges seem less daunting, failures feel less frustrating, and new species seem even more exciting than they would if participants were going it alone.

PLOTTING A COURSE

Plotting a course typically refers to the planning that a fisherman or other navigator completes prior to embarking on a nautical journey. But planning "courses" is also something that a chef, or even a dedicated home cook, does when concocting a menu for a fabulous meal. Planning the future of local seafood in New England is something that requires both sets of hands, and more—not only those who catch, sell, and eat seafood, but also the various marketing councils, fisheries associations, food councils, environmental nonprofits, and educators of many types who make it their mission to shift the seafood system in directions that are more sustainable, equitable, and profitable for New England residents.

The Eat Like a Fish report adds to a small but growing collection of research that describes a need for introducing a food systems framework to the field of fisheries—a field that has been dominated for many decades by a focus on government-led regulation, to the exclusion of other aspects of governance, such as markets. Previous research has also highlighted the need for greater tracking of "fish flow" in the region (since little is known about the origins of seafood bought in New England or the destinations of seafood landed in New England). We reiterate both of those calls here, and hope that the Eat Like a Fish project contributes not only to filling data gaps, but also to increasing the public's awareness about the importance of "knowing where your seafood comes from."

Lastly and most importantly, we hope that the Eat Like a Fish project helps establish the notion of "diversity" as a foundational principle for the marketing of wild-caught seafood in New England. As ecosystems change more rapidly than ever before due to climate change, we must make our seafood systems hyper-adaptable and our palates ultra-versatile. In the past, imbalances between ecosystems and fishery catches have led to distortion of marine food webs, with repercussions both for fish and for the people who depend on them. Now, it is more critical than ever to assure that our human systems are moving in sync with natural systems. Promoting the diversification of local seafood markets is one way to embrace this future of uncertainty head-on, with forks, knives, and hungry friends at the ready.

MARKETING TIPS

Based on the Eat Like a Fish citizen science project, Eating with the Ecosystem offers the following tips for seafood sellers, eaters, and all those who strive to attain a more vibrant, diversified local seafood system.

FOR FISHMONGERS:

- What's new? Lack of familiarity can be a barrier to consumer interest. Or it can be a selling point!
- Tastes like... When lack of familiarity presents an impediment, try drawing parallels between an unfamiliar species and a more familiar species.
- Sell the story. Selling seafood is not just about the fish, but about the people behind the fish.
- Sell yourself. You are part of the story. Fishmongers are more influential than anyone else in driving up demand for new species.

FOR EATERS:

- In good company. Shared learning experiences (for example, hobby groups for seafood explorers) can help customers build confidence, maintain energy, and apply gentle peer pressure to motivate each other.
- Special treatment. If a species isn't on the counter, ask a market to special-order it. They are usually happy to locate it for you. The more you ask, the more you help build demand!
- The whole shebang. Don't be shy about cooking with whole fish. The more fins and scales you deal with in the kitchen , the more you will enjoy the meal that follows (sometimes)!

FOR THE SUPPORT COMMUNITY:

- Fishmongers are teachers. Professional development and information-sharing can enhance their ability to deliver important information to their customers.
- Learn from the standouts. Some markets already excel at selling a highly diverse array of local seafood. What's their secret?
- Engage early adopters. Not everyone is ready to try a sea robin or a razor clam. Start by working with those who are. Others will follow.
- Making a good first impression. When fish are handled or prepared poorly, it can turn a person off for years, particularly when (s)he is making up his or her mind about a species. Avoid this by investing in best practices training for fishmongers and cooking classes for eaters.

WHELKS, TYLER MURGO