



A CANADIAN CRUSTACEAN CHRISTMAS

Many will be tucking into a lobster this festive season, Canada's top seafood export. Landings of this species have increased sevenfold in 40 years, but although it is not considered to be endangered, its fishery is far from perfect



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You may recall the Christmas adverts over the last few years about £5 lobsters at a certain frozen food outlet that "mums love to go to" and other supermarkets. The EU labelling laws require packaging to at least tell you that the lobster is from an area called "FAO 21" (Northwest Atlantic) but that's not very sexy so often the packaging calls it "Canadian lobster" which is actually the species American lobster (*Homarus americanus*), which is caught in Canada. The UK is Canada's most important market for seafood in the European Union. In September 2017, a new EU-Canada agreement was formed, eliminating tariffs on nearly all seafood products, saving money and increasing exports to the UK. The agreement, called the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) has reduced tariffs from around eight to zero percent, which

▲ American Lobster. Photo NOAA

THE AMOUNT OF BAIT USED, MOSTLY HERRING, CAN OFTEN EXCEED THE AMOUNT OF LOBSTER LANDED

provides greater access for our main imports. American lobster is of particular interest, as it is Canada's top seafood export. American lobsters are mainly caught in Nova Scotia, from November to May and most lobsters are transported through the US before being sold to Europe. But there's a problem, because although American lobster in Canada are not considered to be endangered or vulnerable, the fishery and ecosystem are in far from perfect condition.

CRUSTACEAN CRISIS

The main issue is that the fishery accidentally catches several at-risk species as bycatch, particularly the Critically Endangered North Atlantic right whale, which get entangled in lobster fishing gear. Their populations are in very low numbers – just 500 – with a recent 40% decrease in

EAT THE RIGHT THING



▲ North Atlantic right whale. Photo NOAA

birth rates and 14 found dead in 2017. The lobster industry does try to avoid their capture but more needs to be done to prevent their decline. Another important concern is the amount and source of bait (mostly herring) used in the lobster fishery. The amount of bait used can often exceed the amount of lobster landed at the port; it is unknown how sustainable the bait source is. American lobster in Canada undergo high exploitation rates: lobsters are often caught as soon as they reach maturity. This is a problem because it removes the mature lobsters from the population who are producing all the eggs (the next generation). In response to this, some areas within Canada employ good management measures, for example increasing the minimum legal landing size or decreasing the amount of fishing pressure on the lobster population. But management varies hugely among Canadian lobster fisheries and this really doesn't help when trying to make a sustainable seafood purchase at your local supermarket. Data on the abundance of lobster in the fishery area is lacking, making it more difficult to monitor and manage their populations. Finally, air miles! Transporting lobsters nearly 3,000 miles (plus all the fishing and processing) lands you with a hefty greenhouse gas bill.

LOBSTER LOW-DOWN TELLING AMERICAN FROM EUROPEAN

If you're going to choose lobster then make sure you can tell your American lobster from a European lobster (*Homarus gammarus*). Why do you need to do this? Well, European lobsters are under pressure as live American lobsters have been illegally released into our waters, sometimes in their hundreds. American lobsters are usually olive green or greenish brown and the underside of their claws are orange-red; European lobsters are blue to dark blue and the underside of their claws are generally a cream colour.

CRITICALLY ENDANGERED NORTH ATLANTIC RIGHT WHALES GET ENTANGLED IN LOBSTER FISHING GEAR

▼ Catch areas inside Canadian waters. Maps by FreeVectorMaps.com

Firstly, ask your supermarket fishmonger questions: **What** species are you buying? **Where** did it come from (country origin)? and **How** was it captured e.g. lobster pot? This is crucial information to work out if your food is from a sustainable source. The demand for traceability is growing: if supermarkets hear you asking questions, they'll know that sustainable seafood is important to you.

Always choose **Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)** labelled lobster: there are five certified MSC lobster fisheries in Canadian waters. These fisheries generally employ stricter management. The MSC lobster is available at supermarkets such as Aldi and Marks and Spencer. Another brand that you might recognise is 'Big and Juicy': 🍷

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

To improve the Canadian lobster fishery, more data on the lobster stock and increased monitoring and protection for North Atlantic right whales is required. These changes are plausible, particularly because Canada's Department for Fisheries and Oceans have just announced a mega CAN\$400m Atlantic Fisheries Fund (AFF) to improve the availability of high-quality and sustainably sourced seafood.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Improving trade with Canada brings new markets on both sides of the pond. But before we hurry out for our Christmas crustacean, we need to ask ourselves – is this ok to eat? Here are two ways that you can help the American lobsters and their ecosystems:

