

WALLEYE POLLOCK



Walleye pollock comprise the largest single-species commercial fishery in the world. The reasons are threefold: pollock roe has become very popular in Japan; the fish is now used as a substitute for the depleted stocks of cod and haddock in the Atlantic and made into frozen fillets or fish sticks; and, perhaps most important, it is used to make surimi (imitation shellfish).

To make surimi the walleye pollock is filleted, minced, and thoroughly washed in chilled water to remove blood, fat, and enzymes and increase certain elastic proteins. The water is then pressed out, leaving an odorless, white substance that has a texture similar to crab meat. To make the final product—simulated shellfish—color and flavors are added.

Robin Love, in his delightful book *Probably More Than You Want to Know About the Fishes of the Pacific Coast*, calls surimi “pretend seafood.” It is a pretty good facsimile of the real thing—and much more affordable.

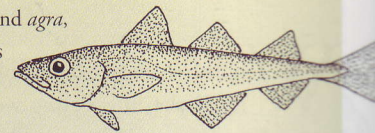
Human demand for the exotic roe, fish sticks, and surimi competes directly with some other creatures. For example, walleye pollock comprise over half the diet of the Steller sea lions in the Gulf of Alaska. The pollock are smaller now, and biologists believe the sea lions are suffering nutritional stress as a result. Also, common murrens on the Seward Peninsula have decreased in proportion to the increased harvests of walleye pollock in the south-

eastern Bering Sea. While these cause-and-effect relationships have not been proven, the evidence seems more than circumstantial.

Many other fish species also like to eat pollock, especially young pollock. Some even anticipate the annual arrival of each new crop of pollock and lie in wait for them. In Southeast Alaska, biologists using scuba gear would observe great sculpins lining up in rows just before the small pollock arrived. The sculpin would gorge themselves on pollock until their bellies bulged. For 22 consecutive years the biologists observed a consistent pattern of timing, location, and depth by the young-of-the-year walleye pollock—a consistency that sculpins apparently learned, too. The same pattern appears to occur in the Bering Sea.

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► **It's a Fact:** Its scientific name, *Theragra*, comes from two Greek words—*ther*, meaning “beast,” and *agra*, which means “food”—and refers to its importance as food for sea mammals, such as fur seals.



Identification:

3 well-separated dorsal fins, anus below space between first and second dorsal fins, slightly projecting lower jaw. Some have a tiny chin whisker. Silvery sides, olive green to brown above, often with faint blotches or mottling. Young has 2 or 3 narrow yellow bands on sides. To 3 feet, 11 pounds.

Spawning: February to early May in Bering Sea; late March and April in Gulf of Alaska. Mature at age 3 to 6. Eggs and sperm broadcast in mid-water at depths of 300 to

750 feet. Females produce from 20,000 to 1.7 million eggs each year.

Life Span: Up to 31 years, most less than 18 in Bering Sea and 11 in Gulf of Alaska.

Food: Very young eat copepods; euphausiids, small shrimp, capelin, Pacific sand lance, Pacific herring, and young salmon. Highly cannibalistic on its own young.

Habitat and Range: Over the continental shelf, mostly at depths between 300 and 1,000 feet. Center of abundance is Bering Sea and Gulf of Alaska.