

The Center For Consumer Freedom

An Investigation of the Canadian Seafood “Boycott” Promoted By the Humane Society of the United States

March 2006

Introduction

In 2005 the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), America’s largest and richest animal rights group, announced a U.S. boycott of Canadian seafood products. HSUS’s stated goal was to use the boycott as leverage to convince Canada’s government to abandon its unrelated annual seal hunt.

As of March 17, 2006, HSUS’s website included a list of 234 restaurants and seafood companies, all of which the group claimed were actively boycotting seafood from Canada.

During February and March of 2006 the nonprofit Center for Consumer Freedom (CCF) undertook a survey to determine whether this boycott claim was accurate or misleading. We interviewed knowledgeable leaders at over one-third of companies on HSUS’s boycott list.

Findings

CCF attempted to contact every restaurant and seafood company listed by the Humane Society of the United States as participants in its boycott of Canadian seafood. CCF completed interviews, either over the phone or in person, with knowledgeable representatives of 87 (37 percent) of these businesses. Most participants were chefs, managers, or seafood buyers.

Among all participants, 31 percent still serve Canadian seafood, 62 percent said they were unaware that their businesses were listed as supporters of the boycott on HSUS’s website, and 53 percent said they were completely unaware of HSUS’s boycott efforts.

Among participants that do not serve Canadian seafood, 68 percent (or 47 percent of all participants) said that they also did not serve it *before* the HSUS boycott began. **Only 18 percent of participants that do not serve Canadian seafood** (or 13 percent of all participants) identified the HSUS boycott as the main reason for this decision.

The combined total of surveyed businesses that serve Canadian seafood, along with those apparent “boycotters” that were not serving it before the boycott began is 78 percent—a number that can confidently be said are not actively participating in the HSUS boycott.

Quotes from representative seafood-boycott survey participants:

“We source a lot from Alaska, but we never got anything from Canada to begin with.”

— President, Palomino Foods (Seattle, WA)

“The animal people can say what they’d like to, of course. Some of our salmon comes from Canada. We have ... fish from 20 countries and we are definitely accepting deliveries from Canada.”

— Customer Service Representative, Marks & Spencer (UK)

“We don’t really follow that stuff. They might have made it up.”

— Restaurant manager, Esca (New York, NY)

“We’re a supplier to Whole Foods and they have asked to boycott...but we buy Canadian seafood. We buy a lot of Canadian seafood.”

— Seafood buyer, Plitt Company (Chicago, IL)

“We don’t sell any seafood ... We do have fish oil ... I don’t think that we were ever getting any Canadian oil.”

— Sales manager, Spectrum Organics (Petaluma, CA)

“[We] don’t really serve seafood.”

— Manager, Butcher’s Chophouse (Park City, UT)

“We’re a vegetarian restaurant.”

— Restaurant hostess, The Cornerstone (Guelph, ON, Canada)

Seafood boycott survey questions and responses

Among all participants:

(1) Does any fish or other seafood on your menu come from Canada?

Yes: 27 (31%) No: 60 (69%) Don't know/No response: 0 (0%)

(2) Are you aware that the Humane Society of the United States has a website that claims your business is boycotting Canadian seafood?

Yes: 20 (23%) No: 54 (62%) Don't know/No response: 13 (15%)

(3) Would it be fair to say that the Humane Society's boycott did not have any impact on the seafood you serve?

Yes: 41 (47%) No: 36 (41%) Don't know/No response: 10 (11%)

(4) Before we spoke today, were you at all aware of the Humane Society's boycott of Canadian seafood?

Yes: 30 (34%) No: 46 (53%) Don't know/No response: 11 (13%)

Among the 60 participants who answered "no" to question #1:

(5) Is the Humane Society's boycott the main reason you decided not to serve any seafood from Canada?

Yes: 11 (18%) No: 41 (68%) Don't know/No response: 8 (13%)
(13% overall) (47% overall) (9% overall)

(6) Were you serving Canadian seafood before the Humane Society's boycott began?

Yes: 7 (12%) No: 41 (68%) Don't know/No response: 12 (20%)
(8% overall) (47% overall) (14% overall)