

Catch Of the Freezer

By Astrid Scholz, Ulf Sonesson and Peter Tyedmers

GO local. Eat organic. Buy fresh. Those food mantras continue to make waves among environmentally conscious consumers. But — as is often the case in these climate-conscious times — if the motivation is to truly make our diets more earth-friendly, then perhaps we need a new mantra: Buy frozen.

Several years ago, the three of us — two ecological economists and one food system researcher — teamed up in an effort to understand how to develop sustainable food systems to feed a planet of nine billion by 2050. As the focus of our study, we chose salmon, an important source of protein around the world and a food that is available nearly anywhere at any time, regardless of season or local supply.

Astrid Scholz is the vice president of knowledge systems at Ecotrust in Portland, Ore. Ulf Sonesson is a researcher at the Swedish Institute for Food and Biotechnology. Peter Tyedmers is a professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia.



SEAN MORRIS

We examined the salmon's life cycle: how the fish are caught in the wild, what they're fed when farmed, how they're processed and transported and how they're consumed.

And what did we find in our research? When it comes to salmon, the questions of organic versus conventional and wild versus farmed matter less than whether the fish is frozen or fresh. In many cases,

fresh salmon has about twice the environmental impact as frozen salmon.

The reason: Most salmon consumers live far from where the fish was caught or farmed, and the majority of salmon fillets they buy are fresh and shipped by air, which is the world's most carbon-intensive form of travel. Flying fillets from Alaska, British Columbia, Norway, Scotland or Chile so that 24 hours later

they can be served "fresh" in New York adds an enormous climate burden, one that swamps the potential benefits of organic farming or sustainable fishing. (Disclosure: A nonprofit subsidiary of Ecotrust, the North Pacific Fisheries Trust, lends money to sustainable fisheries.)

Fresh fish is wonderful and healthful, and if it's driven a reasonable distance to market, then its relative environmental impact is low. Fortunately for conscientious diners, when fish is flash-frozen at sea, its taste and quality is practically indistinguishable from fresh. More important, it can be moved thousands of miles

To fight global warming, eat frozen fish.

by container ship, rail or even truck at much lower environmental impact than when air freighted. If seafood-loving Japanese consumers, who get most of their fish via air shipments, were to switch to 75 percent frozen salmon, it would have a greater ecological benefit than all of Europe and North America eating only locally farmed or caught salmon.

Is the future full of fish sticks? No. But when it comes to eating seafood from halfway around the world, we need to get over our fetish for fresh. With the challenges facing the world's oceans mounting, buying frozen is a powerful choice that concerned eaters everywhere can make.