



Fact Sheet

How Fish are Named

History

Fish, like other animals and indeed with plants, are referred to by both their common and their scientific (Latin) names. But how do fish acquire their common names and what is the logic behind these Latin names?

Fisheries taxonomists using the system devised by Linnaeus three centuries ago, give fish their Latin names. There can be only one Latin name per species. Common or marketing names are sometimes much older than the scientific names. There is often more than one name for a species, and frequently one name for a variety of species, all of which creates much confusion.

Early sailors and the first settlers brought names for Australian fish from places as far as England, the West Indies and the Spanish Main. The first settlers also adopted names used by Aborigines, like barramundi, which is still in common use today.

Common names are generally localised and reflect society's attitude at the time they are devised. For example, the strong military influence in early Australia saw fish species assigned names such as grenadiers, fusiliers and hussars.

Australia boasts some of the world's finest and most diverse seafood, ranging from the Patagonian toothfish of the deep Southern Ocean to prawns caught near coastal mangroves in far north Queensland. Over 4500 species of finfish, and many more crustaceans and molluscs inhabit Australian waters, although only small numbers of species are caught in significant commercial quantities.

The plethora of regional names for each species has resulted in a huge and complicated list of names in use. Additionally, imported species, which comprise around 60 percent of seafood consumed in Australia, contribute other names which have further complicated the situation.

Why do we need uniform marketing names?

Marketers around Australia use hundreds of different common names for fish and shellfish.

Many buyers and consumers lack confidence in their purchases of seafood species, and often feel vulnerable to exploitation through either deliberate or inadvertent substitution of species.

It is important for the industry to be confident that:

- In the event of a public health problem or the necessity of a product recall, the correct fish species is identified and removed from sale



- Inadvertent mislabeling and misidentification has been eradicated

The Fish Names Committee (FNC) has developed a strategy to alleviate this problem. The FNC subsequently developed the Australian Fish Names List.

This list of uniform marketing names applies to all seafood sold in Australia (domestic and imported) and is applied throughout the distribution chain.

How are scientific names determined?

All members of the animal and plant kingdom have a unique scientific name. The classification structure is not unlike a tree. For example, the family tree for a barramundi is:

Classification	Scientific name	Common name
Kingdom	Animalia	Animals
Phylum	Chordata	Chordates
Class	Osteichthyes	Bony fishes
Order	Perciformes	Perch-like fishes
Family	Centropomidae	Freshwater perches
Genus	<i>Lates</i>	
Species	<i>calcarifer</i>	Barramundi

Scientific names for fish have been developed over many years and continue to be updated and corrected as new information comes to hand. The FNC is not involved in this process.

How are marketing names assigned?

FNC has established a set of criteria to be applied when giving names to fish.

The key underlying principles are:

1. A number of species may be collectively known by a group name eg prawn
2. There should be only one name per species
3. Where there is a group name and a species name, the species name should be used (eg, use the name “black tiger prawn” rather than simply “prawn”).

Criteria applied are:

4. Is the name consistent with international conventions? (for example, members of the family Platycephalidae are known internationally as ‘flatheads’. Therefore any new marketing name assigned within that group should be a type of flathead, rather than introducing a misleading name such as ‘barramundi’ or dory.)
5. Will the name cause ambiguity?



6. Is there a history of the name (is the name commonly used in the community?)
7. Will the name have community confidence and acceptance?
8. Is the name appropriately descriptive taking into account issues such as colour, features, and location?
9. Is the name consistent with previous and associated decisions regarding names?
10. Is the name appealing in the marketplace?

The Fish Names Process

The fish names process follows a logical sequence:

- Anyone may propose an amendment to the list. This amendment may be an addition, a deletion, or an alteration to an existing entry in the list.
- The FNC may then forward the proposed amendment to CSIRO Marine Research for taxonomic evaluation and comment. If the amendment involves the addition of a new name, samples of the fish will need to be supplied so that there is certainty as to which species is being given the name. Before a species is given a standard marketing name it has its protein 'fingerprint' taken, so that the fish can be identified from a fillet or part of a fish.. The fingerprints are held by CSIRO in Hobart.
- The Fish Names Committee considers the proposed amendments. If accepted, the provisional amendments are published for public consultation.
- The provisional amendments are then advertised in "The Weekend Australian", other media sources, and on the SSA web site.
- After a three-month public consultation period, FNC reconsiders the provisional amendments taking into account any input from the public consultation process. If the provisional amendments are accepted, the Australian Fish Names List is updated.
- If FNC rejects the proposed amendment, the applicant is contacted and advised of the reasons for rejection.
- The applicant will then be given the opportunity to submit further information to the next FNC meeting.

Other Reading

1. **Yearsley G K, Last P R, Ward R D**,(1999),*Australian Seafood Handbook – An Identification Guide to Domestic Species*; CSIRO Division of Marine Research
2. **Yearsley G K, Last P R, Ward R D**,(2003),*Australian Seafood Handbook – An Identification Guide to Imported Species*; CSIRO Division of Marine Research



3. **Nelson J S**, (1994), *Fishes of the World – 3rd Ed*, John Wiley & Sons
4. Seafood Services Australia web site – www.seafoodservices.com.au
5. **Rees, A.J.J., Yearsley, G.K., and Gowlett-Holmes, K.** *Codes for Australian Aquatic Biota (on-line version)*. CSIRO Marine Research, World Wide Web electronic publication, 1999 onwards. Available at: <http://www.marine.csiro.au/caab/>.
6. **Froese, R, Pauly P** (2000). FishBase 2000: concepts, design and data sources. ICLARM, web site - <http://www.fishbase.org/search.html>