

Changing illegal sales and trade in date mussels in Slovenia

On the terraces of the restaurants along of the Adriatic coast, Slovenian and foreign tourists are enjoying the nice weather, the scenic view and the good food. Until recently restaurants were still serving date mussels as one of their delicacies. These mussels are an endangered species and illegal to trade. However there is little awareness of their importance for marine biodiversity among consumers, cooks, restaurant owners. Enforcement agencies were aware of their importance, but were not effective to change behaviour of target audiences. Big damage is done to environment when taking the mussels out of the rocks at seabed thus destroying the whole marine ecosystems and harming all sorts of marine life. The mussels are consumed on the coast or illegally exported to other parts of the country. Because of the illegal ways of travelling and absence of control, date mussels can go bad and their consumption can be an issue of a health hazard.

The date mussels are on the menu or served under the table (illegally) at many restaurants. Usually you can discretely ask the owner of the restaurant and he will accommodate your wishes taking you to the back room. Until recently. Then Tina, a young biodiversity conservationist, entered the scene. She started conversations in the restaurants with the gastronomy workers and restaurant owners to better understand the supply and demand of the date mussels, alternatives and motives for change. She talked to the fish inspectors and customs control that dealt with smuggling and other illegal practices to get an extra insight in the situation.

She understood that in principle no one wanted to do anything wrong or violate the law on purpose. Everybody loves the Adriatic Sea and its seafood. There were regulations, but there was no efficient law enforcement to protect the date mussel and marine environment. There was a lot of demand of consumers who were not aware of the date mussel as an endangered species and the fragility of the marine ecosystems. Date mussels were considered a delicacy, a culinary prestige. So why bother with the law? Similar was the case with the enforcement. Ignorance of the scale of biodiversity threat and the regulations, does ?? help to put the issue high on the agendas of the enforcement agencies.

Tina's message was clear: we have a choice! We can either continue damaging nature by eating date mussels or we can do the right moral thing, and make sure we eat other species of mussels that grow much faster and can be gathered without a damage to the environment. That way we also make a concrete contribution to something we call sustainable or responsible tourism and we also take care of our personal health. With this message she got around the table with biology experts, the customs authority, the national consumer association, the chamber of commerce, the inspection and the environment ministry. If every organization played its part and worked together things could change for the better.

Through the channels of these organizations and the public media an awareness campaign was started. The public got messages that you could do the right thing and eat many other species of mussels or another delicacy or do the wrong and immoral thing and eat the endangered date mussels. *How could you be happy and enjoy the beautiful Adriatic, when doing something wrong by eating the forbidden mussels? Why not be fair to this endangered species and the sea and do the right thing? In the end you enjoy your meal much more! And it's safe for your health too.* The chamber of commerce approached the restaurant owners to raise awareness about sustainability and social responsibility; the inspection putted the issue higher on the agenda with regular checks of restaurant kitchens, the custom officers and criminal police cracked down on date mussel smuggling. These concerted actions resulted in a significant drop in the sales and smuggling of date mussels.

Today tourists enjoy the Adriatic seaside from the terraces of the restaurants while having a good glass of wine and a good meal from the Slovenian gastronomic cuisine. The date mussels stay in their caverns, the rich and colourful marine ecosystems provide abundant sea food and an attraction to look at for snorkelling in the Adriatic Sea.