

SPECULATING ON EXTINCTION

Gary Stokes on the battle to save bluefin tuna

Back in 2008 I found myself slipping into a tuna pen in Malta with over 1,000 bluefin tuna.

As an underwater photographer, my mission was to capture images for the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society to use in its upcoming Mediterranean campaign, Operation Blue Rage. This campaign aimed to draw attention to the over exploitation and drive towards extinction of this incredible animal, and to also take direct action against illegal poachers found after the quota had already been closed.

ICCAT: The International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (aka. The International Conspiracy to Catch All Tuna as it is often referred as) was failing the bluefin tuna. Catch quotas were being set far too high, ignoring all the scientists and NGO's. Beyond the already too high quota, illegal unreported catches annually were well over three times that of the ICCAT quota of 14,000 tons.

With ICCAT failing, the decision was made to seek out another authority to curb the decline of the bluefin. Monaco proposed to have the bluefin tuna added to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species Flora and Fauna), listed under the CITES Appendix I. Success would have given the species the protection it so desperately needed. However the

proposal fell short of votes at the CITES CoP15 in 2010, held in Qatar. The management and thus fate of the species was reverted back to ICCAT.

The misreporting of catches has been a longstanding issue in the Mediterranean. One of the reasons that ICCAT has been such a hugely ineffective management instrument is that for years, nations have been supplying incorrect or insufficient data regarding bluefin catches, and this falsification has gone unchallenged.

The crime of under-reporting

An independent study of four Italian purse-seiners found that each vessel had caught over three times their individual vessel quota for 2001. Of all the EU countries, Italy is the worst offender when it came to under-reporting catches and overfishing, with landings of up to three times its overall quota.

A report put out by the WWF on Italy's bluefin tuna fishery exposed serious and repeated violations by its purse seine fleet of the regulations set by ICCAT and the European Commission (EC). According to the report, Italy's fleet caught more than five times the reported levels in 2007, which undermines Italy's claim that it was under quota in 2008. Other documented offences include continued illegal use of spotter planes to spot schools of tuna, an abundance of unregistered and unlicensed

vessels and unrecorded diversions of catch to tuna farms in Croatia, Malta and Tunisia.

The French Navy patrol boat 'Arago' occasionally inspects tuna fishing vessels. In one operation where 24 boats in the Eastern Mediterranean were subjected to surprise visits, the Turkish were found to be the biggest culprits. The French Navy report stated:

"The Turkish didn't seem to apply the regulations. Registration documents were either not filled in or simply did not exist. There are no ICCAT observers in the purse seiners or the vessels are simply not registered with ICCAT."

Rules set by ICCAT state that every vessel larger than 24 meters must carry a regional observer. The French found only one observer across the entire fleet, and they questioned his honesty.

"After inspections he would find all sorts of explanations or false arguments to try to justify non-compliance with ICCAT recommendations. Moreover, the estimations of the amount of fish in the cages given by him were on average ten times lower than those estimated by the French Navy divers."

During the operation, the French Navy detailed some 22 breaches of ICCAT regulations, including unlicensed fishing, poor or absent record keeping and the taking of

Photo Sarah Carr, 2009/Marine Photobank

juveniles. Sadly the French Navy patrol is a rarity, but its findings are a good example of the problems facing this fishery-gone-out-of-control. With the absence of proper enforcement, together with the high profits

that can be made, the bluefin tuna poachers are willing to take the risks in continuing their illegal operations. The bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) are finfish belonging to the Thunnini, a sub-species of the much bigger mackerel family (Scombridae), which also includes mackerels, bonitos and skipjacks. There are three species of bluefin tuna: the Atlantic or Northern bluefin tuna, the Pacific bluefin tuna and the Southern bluefin tuna.

While the Southern bluefin population around Australia and in the Indian Ocean is listed as being at extremely high risk of extinction in the wild, the Atlantic bluefin tuna has no listing at all, due to insufficient data on the populations.

ICCAT regulations state a minimum legal landing size of 30kg to allow the bluefin to enjoy at least one reproduction cycle before being killed. However with the emergence of tuna farms, juvenile fish are now being removed from the wild before they can spawn.

Bluefin tuna farms do not breed and rear fish in captivity. They rely on wild tuna, caught from already declining stocks by purse seining fleets, which have massively expanded in recent years.

Bluefin tuna farming is bringing the species to the brink of extinction.



Over 70 farms have opened up in the Mediterranean in less than 15 years, now operating along the Spanish, Turkish and Maltese coasts. With a capacity of over 60,000 tons, these farms alone can hold twice the total catch quota.

It is easy to see where the insatiable demand for bluefin comes from. With single fish fetching hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Speculating on extinction

Japan's Mitsubishi Corporation handles nearly half of the world's bluefin tuna market. It currently buys up, freezes and stores around 20,000 tons of bluefin every year for 'investment purposes'. Profiting from the extinction seems to be at the heart of the operation. The company freezes the fish "to even out the peaks and troughs in supply" but the actual effect is that it is driving up prices and creating a scarcity in supply.

Speculating on the extinction of a species is a crime against the environment, future generations and poses a very real risk to the delicate eco-systems that these apex predators keep in balance.

Their removal is akin to a game of Russian roulette,



Photos on pages 1, 12 & 13 © Gary Stokes

however in this case five out of six chambers in the gun contain a bullet. Japanese companies have strong vested interests in keeping up the supply of cheap bluefin from the Mediterranean. Almost all exports from tuna farms go through Japanese trading companies. Torei-Toyo Reizo (the tuna arm of Mitsubishi), Takayama, Kayo, Maruha and Mitsui all have their fingers in the tuna farming industry. In some countries such as Croatia, Japanese capital has been used to establish new farms. Along with Japanese investments, the European Union is supporting the development of tuna farms by handing out subsidies to the fishing communities. Subsidies are also being used for the building of tuna processing factories and the construction of new vessels, in addition to the fleets that are already fishing way over the quota.

Besides the overfishing of the bluefin tuna to fill the farms, their feed, which consists of smaller fish, is also fished from local stocks.

Serious concerns have already been expressed about the Mediterranean populations of anchovy, which are over-exploited in many regions and are often used to feed farmed tuna.

An independent performance review of ICCAT in September 2008 left little doubt about the severity of the situation. Management of the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin fisheries were described as an "international disgrace" with "indications that collapse could be a real possibility." The report recommended that ICCAT should immediately suspend all fishing until its members could show that they "can control and report their catch" accurately.

With the fate of the bluefin still balancing precariously on a knife-edge, and illegal fishing and under-reporting of catches still rife across the entire Mediterranean, what hope of survival does the bluefin have?

We come again to a fork in the road, where we can either decide to allow the fishing corporations to continue profiting and speculating on extinction, or take action to get the fisheries under control and save this important apex predator. If countries decide that they wish to pursue this route, the only option seems to be to propose the bluefin tune again for CITES protection. Only when the international trade in this endangered species is monitored and controlled will we have any chance of its survival.

The question is which country will step forward and champion the plight of the bluefin by submitting the proposal to CITES for consideration at the CoP17 meeting in South Africa in 2016?

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