

ACT NOW OR IT'S HISTORY



PewEnvironment.org/tuna

FACTS

Atlantic bluefin tuna are remarkable animals. They race across the ocean like supercars, reaching speeds of up to 100 kilometers an hour. They can dive to depths of 500 to 1,000 meters¹ and migrate thousands of kilometers a year between where they spawn and breed and where they feed. Bluefin tuna have captivated the imagination since the time of Aristotle. But since World War II, overfishing, facilitated by high-tech fishing techniques and ballooning fishing capacity, has brought populations of these ocean giants precariously close to collapse. Swift action is needed now to protect Atlantic bluefin tuna or it is likely to disappear from our seas and our menus forever.

BIOLOGY

Atlantic bluefin tuna can live for 40 years, grow to 4.5 meters in length and weigh up to 726 kilograms.² Bluefin inhabit the entire North Atlantic, from the Sea of Norway to the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean Sea. They can be found in more regions of the Atlantic than any other tuna.³ Bluefin have been managed as two separate stocks, one inhabiting the Eastern and one the Western Atlantic Ocean, but with overlapping distributions in the Northern Atlantic. Bluefin feed chiefly on other ocean surface species such as herring and sand lance.

Unique among tuna, bluefin have only two known spawning grounds—the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean. They return to these spawning grounds

year after year,⁴ making protection of these areas a top conservation priority.

The older and therefore bigger the female fish, the more eggs they produce. A five-year-old female produces about 5 million eggs, while females 15 to 20 years old produce as many as 45 million. This makes these giant females extremely important for the future of the species. Yet it is precisely these bluefin giants that the industry is most interested in catching.

HISTORY

Archaeological evidence shows that humans have hunted bluefin since at least the seventh century BC. The Romans and Phoenicians fished for bluefin with traps and handlines. Fishing practices remained sustainable and essentially unchanged until the twentieth century, when fishermen began targeting bluefin for canning. Driven by the possibility of high profits, fishermen began employing larger purse seines, harpoons and pelagic longlines. With the use of sonar, radar and spotting planes, humans now hunt dwindling numbers of bluefin with deadly efficiency.

In the 1980s, the Japanese sushi-sashimi market exploded, and the resulting demand for bluefin made it the most profitable fish in the sea. While the largest fish are exported directly to Japan for immediate sale, others are caught for fattening on tuna farms in the Mediterranean. Ranching operations are intended to grow juvenile bluefin to a marketable size, whereas fattening operations hold large bluefin for short periods

¹ Frometin, J. M. Field Manual, ICCAT, Chapter 2.1.5: Atlantic Bluefin as citing Brill *et al.*, 2001; Lutcavage *et al.*, 2000, p. 3: see http://www.iccat.int/Documents/SCRS/Manual/CH2/2_1_5_BFT_ENG.pdf.

² *Ibid.*, p. 2.

³ Frometin, Jean-Marc; Powers, Joseph, "Atlantic Bluefin Tuna: Population Dynamics, Ecology, Fisheries and Management." Fish and Fisheries vol. 6, 2005 p. 283.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

(two to six months) to increase the fat content in their flesh and their market value. Individual fish have been known to sell for upwards of USD 100,000.

MANAGEMENT & GOVERNANCE

In the Atlantic, bluefin tuna are managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. ICCAT is responsible for setting annual catch limits for its 48 member countries. These catch limits (the number of bluefin these countries are allowed to catch) are supposed to be set in accordance with the advice of ICCAT's scientific panel—the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS). In reality, however, the Commission, which is a political body, has routinely set annual catch limits well above the scientifically determined recommendations to end overfishing and rebuild these depleted stocks.

In 2007, for instance, ICCAT's scientists recommended an annual quota of no more than 15,000 metric tonnes, but ICCAT policymakers set the official limit at nearly twice that amount. In addition to this “legally allocated catch,” thousands of metric tonnes of bluefin above the official limit are caught and sold. These illegally caught and unreported fish result in a total annual northern



bluefin tuna catch that may be more than double the agreed total allowable catch. This is despite the fact that the legal total allowable catch is far higher than the level that will allow the species to even begin to recover.⁵

CRITICAL ACTION IS NEEDED NOW

ICCAT scientists estimate that continued fishing at current levels will “drive the spawning stock biomass to very low levels...result[ing] in a high risk of fisheries and stock collapse.”⁶ Studies show that the Western stock of Atlantic bluefin has declined 82 percent since 1970. In fact, ICCAT's data sadly suggest that only about 34,000 bluefin tuna are left in the Western Atlantic population.⁷ The last assessment made by ICCAT scientists in 2008 showed that the spawning stock in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean declined by 74.2 percent between 1955 and 2007, with the bulk of the decline in recent years.⁸ The adage that “there are plenty more fish in the sea” is history.

For more than 30 years, ICCAT has had countless opportunities to take the necessary action to secure the status of Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks and to put in place a scientifically based, precautionary recovery plan for a species in serious trouble. ICCAT has failed on both counts. ICCAT must agree on a zero quota for the North Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery at this year's meeting. In addition, a CITES Appendix I listing for bluefin is the only enforceable and effective tool that the international community has left to prevent the commercial extinction of this iconic species and to rebuild the Atlantic bluefin population for future generations.

⁵ ICCAT, “Report of the 2008 Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Stock Assessment Session,” 2008, p. 31.

⁶ ICCAT, “ICCAT Report 2008-2009, Executive Summary” p. 73.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167-168.

⁸ ICCAT, Report of the 2008 Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Stock Assessment Session, 2008.

THIS IS OUR LAST CHANCE to save Atlantic bluefin tuna

Susan Lieberman, PhD, Deputy Director, Pew Environment Group
Director, International Policy www.pewenvironment.org
p: +1 202-540-6361 cell: +1-202-725-7014 e: slieberman@pewtrusts.org

