



Keith Ellenbogen/Oceana

A SPECIES ON THE BRINK

Bluefin tuna are in trouble in the Atlantic Ocean. The incredible value of this species creates an extraordinary incentive to ignore quotas, fish illegally and pressure regulators to disregard scientific recommendations. The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) is the multinational management body for Atlantic bluefin tuna. ICCAT has struggled for decades to sustainably manage bluefin tuna, but it has proved to be a dismal failure in halting the decline toward commercial extinction of this iconic species.

Frustrated with the continuing inability of ICCAT to sustainably manage Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks, and the increasing illegal and unregulated take of this species, the world is now turning to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). CITES, with 175 member nations, is an international treaty that regulates or prohibits the international trade in protected species. Listing Atlantic bluefin tuna on Appendix I of CITES would prohibit all international trade in the species—a critical factor in controlling plummeting populations.

A species of extremes

The Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) is a truly remarkable fish. Occupying a spot at the top of the ocean's food chain, Atlantic bluefin can live 40 years, grow to 4 meters in length and weigh up to 726 kilograms.¹ They are warm-blooded and able to stabilize their body temperature even as they dive more than 900 meters into icy waters and migrate across the Atlantic Ocean each year, from North American to European waters.² The species also carries the dubious distinction of fetching the highest commercial prices

“Tuna epitomize what it is to be a fish. Their sleek muscle-bound bodies cut through the water with effortless mastery, driven by high crescent tails beating side to side in rapid staccato. Pectoral fins shaped like hydroplanes flick and twist on the unseen marine breeze, lending remarkable agility to such stiff-bodied creatures.”

—CALLUM ROBERTS

“THE UNNATURAL HISTORY OF THE SEA”

on international markets, with individual fish selling for upwards of US\$100,000. The extremely high price of Atlantic bluefin, fueled by the international sushi market, has led to rampant and unchecked overfishing (legal and illegal), driving this species toward commercial extinction.

ICCAT's management failures

ICCAT scientists predicted that if the 2007 levels of fishing mortality were to continue, the Eastern Atlantic spawning stock would plummet to 18 percent of the 1970 stock assessment level and 6 percent of the historical level.³ This unsustainable trend is corroborated by the dramatic decline of the mean size of fish caught. Some members of ICCAT's scientific committee predict that even under a complete fishing ban, there is a significant risk that the stock will continue to decline to record lows.⁴ For the western stock, ICCAT scientists noted that, even with a projected zero catch, there is the potential under high recruitment scenarios that the spawning stock would still be at risk in 2019.⁵

A self-commissioned 2008 independent review of ICCAT stated,

ICCAT CPCs' [Contracting Parties] performance in managing fisheries on bluefin tuna particularly in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea is widely regarded as an international disgrace and the international community which has entrusted the management of this iconic species to ICCAT deserve better performance from ICCAT than it has received to date.⁶

Sadly, these management failures have been ICCAT's signature. This was increasingly clear at its most recent meeting as it considered a response to the devastating science about the state of the species. At that meeting, Parties set a quota for the Eastern Atlantic bluefin stock that, even with perfect implementation, provides significantly less than a 50 percent chance of population recovery to Maximum Sustainable Yield by 2023. Enforcement of this new quota is hardly to be expected with the recent history of rampant illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean and the lack of enactment of new enforcement provisions at the recent annual meeting. IUU fishing is estimated to have driven the most recent catch (2008) over the agreed quota by upwards of 12,000 tonnes. The quota, set at 13,500 tonnes beginning in 2010, is also notably higher than the 8,000-tonne quota for the east called for by the



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United States at the meeting—and we strongly believe that the science supports an even lower quota than that. This new quota is not in line with ICCAT's own scientific advice and does not include any strengthened management or compliance measures to address IUU harvest.⁷

With ICCAT's failure to take sufficient action on behalf of this species, there is no doubt that the significant global effort inherent in a CITES Appendix I listing is needed to ensure the conservation and recovery of the North Atlantic bluefin tuna.

A species in need of CITES protection

CITES currently offers protection to more than 30,000 species around the world and has been instrumental in preventing the decline toward extinction due to trade of numerous iconic plants and animals. The Convention, with one of the largest memberships of all conservation agreements, is an impressive example of international cooperation.

As confirmed by ICCAT scientists in October 2009, the probability that the Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks (both western and eastern) are below 15 percent of the unfished, historical baseline is virtually certain, and the species thus fully qualifies for inclusion in CITES Appendix I.⁸ A December 2009 review of the species by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) similarly determined that when using the unfished, historical baseline called for in CITES appendix listings,⁹ both eastern and western populations of Atlantic bluefin tuna meet the criteria for listing on Appendix I.¹⁰

Furthermore, the same FAO panel stated that an Appendix I listing would probably reduce the bluefin catch and help to ensure that recent unsustainable catches in the East Atlantic and Mediterranean are reduced.¹¹ Given that most of the annual catch of Atlantic bluefin is exported internationally, a CITES prohibition on international trade of the fish would give the Atlantic bluefin tuna the time it needs to recover to sustainable levels.

CRITICAL ACTION IS REQUIRED NOW

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, when it failed at that, to put in place a scientifically based, truly precautionary recovery plan. ICCAT has failed on both counts and the world is taking note.

In March 2010, the 15th meeting of the CITES Conference of Parties will convene and vote on the proposal, submitted by the Principality of Monaco, to

list Atlantic bluefin tuna on CITES Appendix I.¹² This proposal is receiving increasing levels of international support. **It is time for countries around the world to protect Atlantic bluefin tuna with complete and vigorous support for a CITES Appendix I listing.** A CITES Appendix I listing for Atlantic bluefin tuna is the most effective and enforceable tool available to prevent the commercial extinction of these majestic animals.

¹ J. M. Fromentin, *ICCAT Field Manual*, Chapter 2.1.5: "Atlantic Bluefin," citing Brill et al. (2001) and Lutcavage et al. (2000), <www.iccat.int/Documents/SCRS/Manual/CH2/2_1_5_BFT_ENG.pdf>, pp. 2–3.

² *Ibid.*

³ ICCAT, *Report of the Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) (2009)*, Section 8.5, "BFT—Atlantic Bluefin Tuna," Subsection BFTE–4, "Outlook," <www.iccat.int/Documents/Meetings/Docs/2009-SCRS_ENG.pdf>.

⁴ B. R. MacKenzie et al., "Impending collapse of bluefin tuna in the northeast Atlantic and Mediterranean," *Conservation Letters*, 2:25–34 (2009), <www.hmap-medbs-summerschool2009.org/papers/MacKenzie3.pdf>.

⁵ ICCAT, Subsection BFTW—Table 1.

⁶ G. D. Hurry et al., *Report of the Independent Review, International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT)*, PLE-106 (2008), p. 2, <www.iccat.int/Documents/Meetings/Docs/Comm/PLE-106-ENG.pdf>.

⁷ ICCAT, Recommendation 09-06, "Recommendation by ICCAT Amending Recommendation 08-05 to Establish a Multiannual Recovery Plan for Bluefin Tuna in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean" (2009), p. 1, <www.iccat.int/Documents/Recs/compendiopdf-e/2009-06-e.pdf>.

⁸ ICCAT, "Extension of the 2009 SCRS Meeting to Consider the Status of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Populations With Respect to CITES Biological Listing Criteria," Document PA2-604 (2009), pp. 9–10, <www.iccat.int/Documents/Meetings/Docs/PA2-604%20ENG.pdf>.

⁹ CITES Annex 5 (Resolution Conf. 9.24 [Rev. CoP14]), <www.cites.org/eng/res/09/09-24R14.shtml>.

¹⁰ FAO Ad Hoc Expert Advisory Panel, "Preliminary Summary FAO Ad Hoc Advisory Panel, Proposal number 28: Atlantic bluefin tuna" (December 2009), <www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/newsroom/docs/panel_preliminary_summary.pdf>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Available at www.cites.org/common/cop/15/raw_props/E-15%20Prop-MC%20T%20thynnus.pdf.





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CITES 2010 ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA

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POSITION ON A CITES APPENDIX I LISTING

The Pew Environment Group strongly supports the proposal by the Principality of Monaco to include the Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) in CITES Appendix I. The science is clear. A majority of the members of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation's Ad Hoc Panel have determined that eastern and western populations of the species meet the CITES biological criteria for inclusion in Appendix I. CITES Resolution Conf. 9.24 (Rev. CoP14) clearly states that data used to estimate or infer a baseline for extent of decline of a commercially exploited aquatic species should extend as far into the past as possible. The available data on Atlantic bluefin tuna clearly show that the western and eastern stocks meet the Appendix I criteria for marked decline.



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Scientists from the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) predicted that if the current level of fishing mortality continued, the Eastern Atlantic spawning stock would fall to 18 percent of the 1970 level and **6 percent of the historical level**. This trend is corroborated by the dramatic decline in the mean size of fish caught, and some experts predict that even under a complete fishing ban there are significant chances that the stock will continue to decline. This falls well within the CITES definition of marked decline.

It should be stressed that the productivity of Western Atlantic bluefin is closely linked to the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock. New scientific information, which is expected to appear in the peer-reviewed literature before the CITES Conference of the Parties (CoP15) in March 2010, highlights more genetic mixing than was previously hypothesized. Therefore, management actions taken in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean are likely to influence the recovery in the Western Atlantic. A higher degree of mixing than had been assumed also puts the western stock at even greater risk and makes it even more eligible for CITES Appendix I, because increasing overfishing in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, and increasing illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing in both the Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic will have greater negative impacts on recruitment in the Western Atlantic.

Bluefin tuna are remarkable animals, able to dive more than 900 meters and migrate thousands of kilometers each year across the ocean. But they are in trouble. Fueled by the lucrative sushi and sashimi markets around the world, the incredible value of this species creates an extraordinary incentive to ignore quotas, fish illegally and pressure regulators to disregard scientific recommendations. The best science shows that populations of Atlantic bluefin tuna are on the brink of collapse. Time is short, and the time for listing Atlantic bluefin tuna on Appendix I is now.



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ICCAT is the regional fisheries management body responsible for Atlantic bluefin tuna. ICCAT has struggled for decades to sustainably manage Atlantic bluefin tuna, but to date it has proved to be a dismal failure in halting the continuing decline toward commercial extinction of this iconic species. When the Atlantic bluefin tuna was considered for a CITES listing in 1992 (at CoP8), ICCAT committed to lowering quota levels to rebuild the stock. Quotas were cut in the first two years after the 1992 CITES CoP in Japan, but the quota was subsequently raised dramatically. Clearly, ICCAT management measures have been ineffective at preventing the decline of the stock. An independent review that ICCAT commissioned stated,

ICCAT CPCs' performance in managing fisheries on bluefin tuna particularly in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea is widely regarded as an international disgrace and the international community which has entrusted the management of this iconic species to ICCAT deserve better performance from ICCAT than it has received to date.

In addition, the lack of adequate enforcement and rampant IUU fishing for bluefin tuna have pushed actual mortality rates to three to five times the limits recommended by ICCAT scientists and up to double

that agreed by ICCAT itself. International trade poses an increasing threat to the survival of this majestic species. Placing Atlantic bluefin tuna on Appendix I at CoP15 will give populations of this fish a chance to rebuild. The primary threat to this species is international trade—and that is the purview of CITES to address. While ICCAT is responsible for assigning quotas, only CITES can regulate international trade, and only CITES has the authority and ability to suspend international commercial trade until the species recovers.

The Principality of Monaco, interested in preserving the role of ICCAT in management of Atlantic bluefin tuna, has included a draft resolution to accompany its proposal that sets the parameters for transferring the species to Appendix II in the future, as well as an appropriate role for ICCAT while the Atlantic bluefin is included in Appendix I. This listing proposal is not meant to be punitive for ICCAT; rather, it is designed to provide assistance for the sustainable conservation and management of a critical species under its jurisdiction. An Appendix I listing for Atlantic bluefin would concurrently enable ICCAT to build a stronger record in terms of setting scientific quotas, enforcing those quotas and working with the global community to significantly reduce IUU fishing. The resolution would enable the CITES Parties to work with ICCAT and determine when the species had recovered sufficiently for it to be transferred to Appendix II, and would set in motion a process to do so.

RECOMMENDATION

We urge the Parties to support both the proposal itself and the accompanying resolution.

