



ENDING THE WASTE OF BLUEFIN TUNA

The Gulf of Mexico provides important habitat for rare and beautiful marine species including bluefin tuna, blue marlin, sailfish and leatherback sea turtles. The dependence of these species on the Gulf of Mexico forces them to face a common threat—surface longline fishing.

A Wasteful Fishing Practice

Longline fishermen in the Gulf set hundreds of hooks on lines extending an average of 30 miles to catch yellowfin tuna and swordfish,¹ but they also catch and kill approximately 84 other species including spawning bluefin tuna, endangered sea turtles and hard-fighting game fish such as blue marlin.² Longline fishermen are prohibited from keeping these game fish, so they throw them back into the ocean. Many of them die.

Even the target species are wasted. The longline fishermen keep fewer than half of all swordfish they catch due to size restriction,³ and 77 percent of the swordfish that they discard die.⁴

Imperiled Ocean Giants

One of the fish species caught unintentionally on longlines is the Atlantic bluefin tuna. Among the most remarkable creatures on the planet, bluefin can reach 1,500 pounds, complete trans-Atlantic migrations and dive to depths of more than 3,000 feet.⁵ Unfortunately, overfishing, spurred by the growing demand for sushi, has severely depleted their numbers. Scientists estimate that the population of bluefin tuna in the Western Atlantic Ocean has declined by 82 percent since 1970.⁶

The Gulf of Mexico is the only known breeding ground for Western Atlantic bluefin tuna.⁷ Because female bluefin do not reproduce every year and young bluefins die at very high rates, each reproductively mature bluefin tuna in the Gulf is critical to rebuilding this population.⁸ A full closure to surface longlining in these waters would allow Atlantic bluefin tuna populations to rebuild more quickly while providing critical protections for other fish and ocean wildlife.

Bluefin Tuna Management

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), which has 48 member nations, is responsible for managing Atlantic bluefin tuna. Unfortunately, for decades ICCAT set unsustainably high fishing limits, and rather than being rebuilt, bluefin populations have continued to decline.

ICCAT's long history of missed opportunities has left Atlantic bluefin tuna in a perilous situation, and member nations concerned with the plight of bluefin have been forced to look for other solutions. The United States expressed support for listing Atlantic bluefin on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES).⁹ Unfortunately, at the March 2010 meeting of CITES, the international community failed to protect bluefin tuna from commercial exploitation by rejecting an Appendix I proposal for Atlantic bluefin tuna. This designation would have prohibited international trade of Atlantic bluefin tuna, giving the species a fighting chance at recovery. Now, to ensure the long-term sustainability of this valuable resource, it will require swift, decisive action to protect the bluefin's only Western Atlantic spawning ground, the Gulf of Mexico.

The Solution

In 1982, ICCAT enacted a ban on directed bluefin tuna fishing in the Gulf of Mexico spawning ground. Despite this ban, longline fishermen still catch hundreds of spawning bluefin tuna a year.¹⁰ This incidental catch poses a serious threat to the Western Atlantic bluefin tuna's long-term sustainability.

The good news is that we can protect spawning bluefin and other ocean wildlife by closing the Gulf of Mexico to surface longline fishing. This action would provide interim protection for bluefin tuna until the international community could enact stronger regulations. A full

closure would also halt the wasteful killing of game fish such as marlin and sailfish and endangered species such as leatherback sea turtles. And because there are more selective alternative types of fishing gear, fishermen can still keep fishing.

TAKE ACTION TODAY

We need your support now. Please visit our Web site and tell Dr. Jane Lubchenco, administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, to prohibit surface longline fishing in the Gulf of Mexico for swordfish and yellowfin tuna.

www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna

1 Personal communications with Dr. Lawrence Beerkircher and Dr. Kenneth Keene of the Southeast Fisheries Science Center.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.* Also, Beerkircher, L., C.A. Brown and V. Restrepo. 2009. Pelagic observer program data summary, Gulf of Mexico bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) spawning season 2007 and 2008; and analysis of observer coverage levels. NOAA Technical Memorandum NMFSSSEFSC- 588, 33, Table 2, p. 28, www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/hms/Tuna/2009/POP_GOMEX_BFT_588.pdf.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Fromentin, J.M., et al., "Atlantic Bluefin Tuna: Population Dynamics, Ecology, Fisheries and Management," *Fish and Fisheries* (2009), pp. 282-3.

6 International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), "TABLE 4. Spawning Stock Fecundity and Recruitment," Report of the 2008 Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Stock Assessment Session (2008), pp. 167-8.

7 Fromentin et al., pp. 286-8.

8 *Ibid.*, pp. 287 and 290.

9 Black, R., "Bluefin Tuna Trade Ban Gains European Union Backing," BBC News (2009), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8560896.stm>.

10 Beerkircher and Keene.

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For additional resources, visit us at www.PewEnvironment.org/GulfTuna.

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