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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.

