

The Atlantic bluefin tuna crisis

Atlantic bluefin tuna is native to the Western and Eastern Atlantic, as well as the Mediterranean Sea. Bluefin tuna weigh up to 700kg and can reach over 3 metres in length. The highly migratory species can swim as fast as 60 mph an hour, and travels thousands of miles in its lifetime. As one of the top predators in the Mediterranean, bluefin is crucial to its delicate ecosystem.

Bluefin tuna is also one of the most highly valued tuna species in the world. The annual trade is worth millions of dollars in the Mediterranean alone. The bulk of bluefin is exported to Japan, where it is consumed as sushi and sashimi – and where a single fish can fetch up to \$100,000.

There simply aren't enough fish to sustain the world's insatiable appetite. In 1999, Greenpeace recorded how Mediterranean stocks of bluefin tuna had declined by 80%. The situation has only gotten worse. In October 2009, ICCAT scientists found there is a greater than 95% probability that the current spawning biomass of Atlantic bluefin is less than 15% of what it was before industrial fishing began.

The bluefin crisis is the result of decades of destructive over-fishing by purse seine and long-line fishing operations. These fishing methods, which take too many fish too fast, have left the Atlantic bluefin unable to recover, forcing responsible artisanal fishing operations to have to halt bluefin fishing. Greenpeace has consistently joined the call by scientists to halt this fishing and create marine reserves- including in Spain's Balearics and in the Sicilian Channel, to allow bluefin and our oceans restore themselves to health.

Management bodies have failed the Atlantic bluefin

The abject failure of the countries party to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) to protect bluefin stocks led a 2008 independent review panel to call the management of the fishery an 'international disgrace'. The panel had been commissioned by ICCAT itself.

ICCAT and its contracting parties, in particular EU and Mediterranean countries that take most of the catch, have repeatedly rejected scientific recommendations to limit catch quotas and protect spawning grounds. ICCAT's own scientists have been sounding the alarm on the dire state of bluefin stocks for over a decade.

From 2006, they recommended catch quotas of no more than 15,000 tonnes – and no fishing at all in spawning grounds during crucial breeding seasons (May and June). Not only did bluefin fishing nations such as France, Spain and Italy and others reject this advice but they actually started to build bigger, more efficient fishing vessels.

ICCAT member countries have also failed to even stick to the Commission's extremely limited agreements. Increasingly high levels of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing have compounded the crisis. In 2007 for instance, France fished at levels 53% above its quota, meaning that every third fish was illegal.

Greenpeace has documented numerous incidences of illegal fishing of bluefin tuna in recent years¹.

¹ See the Greenpeace report "Pirate Booty: How ICCAT is failing to regulate pirate fishing at www.greenpeace.org/international/press/reports/pirate-booty

ICCAT's failures:

- It is estimated that the total catch in 2007 was 61,100 tonnes – twice the agreed legal catch limit and more than 4 times the recommended level.
- The 2008 'recovery' plan allowed a legal catch limit 47% above scientific recommendations.
- The 2009 quota of 22,500 tonnes was still more than a third (7,500 tonnes) over the less precautionary recommended limit. The management plan failed to protect spawning population and only shortened the purse seine fishing season (responsible for the bulk of illegal catches) by 10 days.
- By November 2009, with the latest science recommending that to have even a 50% chance of stock recovery by 2023, the annual eastern Atlantic catch limit must be capped at 8,000 tonnes – the EU, Mediterranean fishing nations, and Japan forced through a catch quota of 13,500 tonnes.
- In February 2010, the ICCAT Secretariat admitted that more than six months after the end of the 2009 fishing season, over 50% of catch reports failed to comply with its new rules designed to combat IUU fishing.

CITES has failed the bluefin

In March 2010, a meeting of the parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species in Doha, Qatar rejected a proposal to list the Northern Atlantic bluefin tuna on its Appendix I. The proposal had the public support of the main bluefin fishing countries, namely the US and the EU. If successful, the proposal would have halted international trade in the species until it had properly recovered. Intense lobbying at CITES by the Japanese delegation helped thwart this last-ditch effort to save the Northern Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Greenpeace: taking action and promoting solutions

Greenpeace is demanding that the bluefin quota for the Mediterranean Sea be set to zero, effectively closing the Mediterranean bluefin fishing operations immediately. In addition, bluefin spawning grounds must be set aside as part of a larger network of protected marine reserves. This would help put the bluefin on the road to recovery: if we want to have fish tomorrow we need marine reserves today.

That species like Atlantic bluefin tuna have been allowed to decline to such dangerous levels demonstrates a clear political failing over many years. The systems put in place to manage fisheries are simply not adequate to protect fish from massive overfishing and they fall far short of protecting our wider marine environment.

Greenpeace is advocating a fundamentally new approach to marine governance – one that seeks to protect the ocean environment as a whole by ensuring that it is used sustainably in every way. An essential part of that new approach is to introduce a network of large scale marine reserves covering around 40% of our oceans that would be closed to fishing and other destructive activities.

For Atlantic bluefin there are obvious marine areas that should be protected to allow the species protection, namely their spawning grounds. In the Mediterranean, these areas include the waters around the Balearic Islands, and the Sicilian Channel. The case for a bluefin sanctuary around the Balearic Islands is particularly strong, and already has the support of the Balearic government, many NGOs, and Mitsubishi Corporation, currently the biggest trader in Mediterranean bluefin. On the other side of the Atlantic, bluefin breeding grounds in the Gulf of Mexico should also be protected.

But, as current news from the Gulf of Mexico makes clear, we need to go further and make sure that all of our oceans are managed in a way that ensures sustainability. This new approach to oceans management would consider the impact of all extractive industries and their impact on the whole marine environment.

The Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery is one of the most visible example of how the industry's approach to fisheries/oceans management has failed us by prioritising short-term profit over long-term sustainability and by putting fishing industry interests over the marine environment.

What needs to happen

In order for bluefin stocks to recover, consumers must refuse to buy bluefin meat at restaurants or supermarkets. In response to the bluefin crisis, chefs have removed bluefin tuna from menus and supermarkets have refused to stock it on their shelves. Consumers have a right to know where their fish comes from and how it was caught. We can drive positive change for the bluefin by staying up to date on Greenpeace's sustainable seafood initiative: www.greenpeace.org/international/seafood and educating ourselves about the impacts fishing has on ocean life and the people dependent on them. Tell your seafood restaurant staff and supermarket fish counter that they should stop selling bluefin – before it is too late.

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