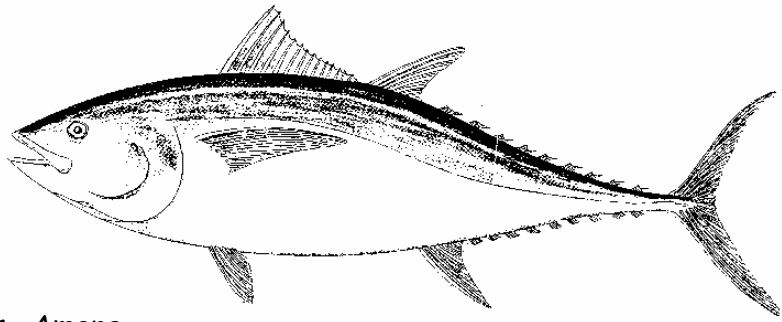


BLUEFIN TUNA



Bluefin are the largest of the 15 species of tuna, reaching 10 feet in length and weighing over 1,400 pounds. Among the swiftest fish in the sea, bluefin can swim in bursts up to 60 miles an hour. It's been said the bluefin is as big as a sports car, as fast as a sports car - and as expensive as one, too. Unfortunately, the exorbitant bounty on its flesh - bluefin are hunted relentlessly for the Japanese sushi market - has driven the majestic bluefin tuna to near-extinction in many parts of its range.

There are two species of bluefin tuna, the northern bluefin (*Thunnus thynnus*) and southern bluefin (*Thunnus maccoyii*), which inhabit their respective hemispheres. U.S. commercial fishermen catch northern bluefin, primarily in the Atlantic, and they target mostly giants for export to Japan. In fact, virtually all the big bluefin caught in both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans end up in Tokyo, where buyers for the luxury sushi and sashimi market pay phenomenally high prices. Bluefin sold at market are breeding-age adults, routinely tipping the scales at over 400 pounds. A 718-pound fish once sold for US\$67,500. The high commercial demand for adult fish, commonly known as "giants," fuels intense fishing pressure that has barely let up despite a 30-year-old international conservation program meant to protect the species.

OVERFISHING HAS TAKEN ITS TOLL ON BLUEFIN POPULATIONS. ICCAT, or the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, is the ocean-wide body charged with regulating fishing for bluefin and other tuna and "tuna-like" species (e.g., billfish). Even though bluefin are capable of crossing an entire ocean in just a few months, ICCAT divides the Atlantic into western and eastern stocks for management purposes. Scientific studies affirm the existence of separate and distinct spawning populations of bluefin, although they do intermingle and their ranges overlap in the central Atlantic. According to the latest study by ICCAT scientists, the western Atlantic population has been reduced to just 18% of the 1975 level (accepted as the proxy for the optimum population size); the eastern Atlantic population has been reduced by more than half. Southern bluefin are in a similarly depleted condition. (The status of northern bluefin in the Pacific is unknown, but of concern due to high rates of fishing mortality in recent years.)

AFTER NEARLY THREE DECADES OF "CONSERVATION," THE DECLINE OF ATLANTIC BLUEFIN HAS YET TO BE STOPPED. ICCAT, in existence since 1969, put the first limits on catching bluefin in the early 1980s. These limits came as the result of an eye-opening 1981 western Atlantic stock assessment which revealed for the first time the effects of an overfishing double-whammy: the netting of millions of juvenile bluefin throughout the 1960s (fish that were canned as cat food), followed by the development of purse seine and longline fisheries for giant tuna in the 1970s to serve a burgeoning sushi market. In effect, the U.S. and other Atlantic fishing fleets decimated generations of young bluefin, and then went to work demolishing the adult population. The devastating result was a rapidly shrinking breeding population with not nearly enough younger fish coming along to replenish it. It was a textbook case of stock collapse.

Management measures enacted in 1982 - centered around a total allowable catch allocated among the three principal fishing nations (US, Canada and Japan) - have remained fairly constant ever since, even though it is clear they aren't working. Meanwhile, the number of western breeders remains at a critically low point and shows no signs of improvement.

MORE CAN AND MUST BE DONE TO PROTECT BLUEFIN TUNA. Years of complacency were shattered in 2005 when New England fishermen, accustomed to battling each other for a shot at the big and valuable tunas, suddenly could barely find any. For four years in a row now, all U.S. fishermen combined are catching a scant 10 percent of their ICCAT quota. One U.S. scientist who works closely with the industry remarked that we are "witnessing the collapse of the New England (bluefin) fishery."

Compounding the western decline has been rampant overfishing of the eastern stock in recent years, particularly on its spawning grounds in the Mediterranean Sea. It is clearly now impacting the west. With fewer and fewer migrants crossing over to our side to prop up our fisheries, the remnant western stock has been exposed as too small to support a viable U.S. fishery. Meanwhile, we allow longlining for yellowfin tuna and swordfish to continue in the Gulf of Mexico, where the last breeding bluefin go to spawn each year.

Tagging studies confirm two separate and discrete bluefin breeding grounds - in the Gulf of Mexico and Mediterranean - and spawning site fidelity, that is, fish originating in the Gulf return there to spawn at maturity. The one place that we can be assured of protecting the west's dwindling population of giant bluefin is in the Gulf of Mexico. In the Gulf, in the spring, every fish we kill is a rare western breeder. And we're killing hundreds each year, as longline bycatch. Closing the gulf to longlining for tuna and swordfish where and when the bluefin spawn would do more than anything else to protect what's left of the western bluefin breeding stock and preserve a U.S. fishery for the future.

NCMC SUPPORTS THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS TO IMPROVE BLUEFIN TUNA CONSERVATION:

- A 5-year ICCAT moratorium on fishing for bluefin tuna in the eastern and western Atlantic to begin rebuilding both depleted stocks; in the absence of a moratorium -
- Increase protections for bluefin on their western spawning ground, including a prohibition on pelagic longlining in the northern Gulf of Mexico from March through June of each year.
- Reduce catches in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea to levels recommended by ICCAT's scientific body (about half current levels).
- Establish a supplementary management program to restrict fishing in the central Atlantic, where fish from the two stocks mix.



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