

Japan Focus

Japan's King of Fish Faces Extinction

Justin McCurry & David McNeill talk to fishermen in the north and south of the country and find widespread alarm at depleted tuna stocks.

On a gloomy day pregnant with rain and the weight of past expectations, Nakamura Minoru is welcomed back to port in Iki-shi like a conquering hero. Three family generations, including Nakamura's father Toshiaki and newborn child Misaki wait ashore, smiles wide as his boat sails into harbor. "Good for him," says a beaming Okubo Terutaka, head of the local fishing cooperative. "That's wonderful to see."

On this remote island off Nagasaki in southern Japan, where rusting boats wait for fishermen who increasingly stay at home, few sights excite more than Nakamura's precious cargo: a 172-kg bluefin tuna, splayed across the deck of his small trawler. Dubbed Japan's King of Fish, at peak prices his single catch will fetch over 1.5 million yen, or nearly \$16,000 at the world's biggest fish market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.

By the time it is carved up and sold as thousands of sushi, sashimi and steak cuts to restaurants across the city, it will be worth at least three times that much -- the price of a luxury family car. In 2001, a 202-kg fish caught off Oma, a town of 6,000 people of the northern coast of Aomori Prefecture famous for producing the tastiest tuna in Japan, a single bluefin sold for a record 20.2 million yen.



Bringing in a tuna in Oma

But the celebrations in Iki-shi are likely to fade as fast as today's watery afternoon sun. Among many of its 32,000 people, one-in-eight of whom depend on the sea to survive, the talk is of one thing: the extinction of their livelihood. "In 40 years on a boat I've never seen it so bad," says veteran seadog Kukeya Yoshiju. "Nakamura-san is lucky today. The fish are not there anymore." Sasaki Atsushi, a fisherman-turned-conservationist who sounds increasingly desperate about Japan and the world's free-falling tuna stocks, speaks of imminent extinction. "If the situation continues, it is inevitable that tuna will disappear from the seas."



Fishing boats at Oma

Global stocks of the highly prized fish have plummeted by 90 percent in the last 30 years, and much of the blame rests with Japan, by far the world's biggest consumer (See sidebar). Every year the Japanese go through about three-quarters of the world's bluefin catch; 80 percent of tuna caught in the Mediterranean ends up on the Japanese market.

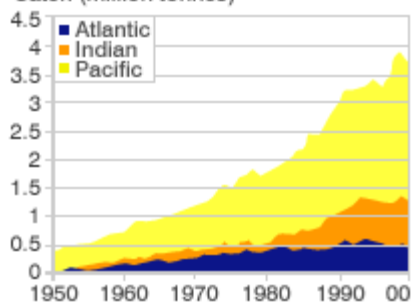
But the global spread of healthy Japanese and Mediterranean cuisine and exploding consumption in China, Russia and elsewhere is also ravaging global stocks, finally causing alarm in the industry. A string of doomsday predictions about the fate of the Pacific tuna forced Japan's largest fisheries coop this summer to announce an unprecedented suspension of operations. In November, a meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) warned that once teeming stocks of bluefin tuna in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea may shortly be put on the official endangered list.

Conservationists want a moratorium, but Japan – one of 45 nations represented at the ICCAT meeting in Morocco, endorsed a total allowable catch of 22,000 tonnes for next year – far above the 8,500 to 15,000 tonnes recommended by the commission's own scientists. The decision was

condemned by many conservation groups, including the World Wide Fund for Nature, which called it “a disgrace.”

WORLD CATCHES OF MAJOR TUNA SPECIES, CUMULATIVE, BY OCEANS

Catch (million tonnes)



SOURCE : FAO 2004

Tuna world catch 1950-2000

Rocketing prices for a fish that until 30 years ago was considered so worthless by many trawlers it was thrown back into the sea or converted into cat-food, have attracted the attentions of the Italian and Russian mafia, who control much of the Mediterranean trade, according to Daniel Pauly, one of the world’s top fisheries experts. “Most Japanese people have no idea where their tuna is coming from,” he says. “If they did, they might eat a lot less.”

Around the coast of Japan in fishing communities like Iki-shi, boats are returning to port empty. Co-op manager Okubo shows a spreadsheet in his office charting the stunning decline in tuna catches: down to a quarter of its 2005 figure. Nakamura’s haul is the first 150kg+ tuna to be caught this year; last year there were over 100. “It began a few years back but it is now really striking,” he explains. “Smaller fish are coming in because they’re all that are left.” Sasaki explains the implications. “Tuna under 36kg are incapable of producing babies, so the fishermen are cutting their own throats by catching immature fish.” But they need to survive. “It’s a vicious circle: the more younger fish they take, the more likely it will be that they go extinct.”

A wiry 61-year old with a crewcut and the teak complexion of an inveterate fisherman, Sasaki quit his office job 20 years ago to devote his life to catching, and saving, the bluefin. Sailing around Japan on a boat named, with incidental irony, Man’yu, or Ten Thousand Tuna, he has become one of the country’s top independent experts on the state of tuna stocks. “Japan’s fisheries have no idea how many tuna they are catching or what size they are,” he says. “The smaller tuna have all been caught, along with the fish they feed on, and unregulated fishing with trawlers is to blame.” He claims the local media have shown little or no interest in the looming extinction of Japan’s beloved staple.

Faced with official diffidence and scant popular enthusiasm for conservationism, Sasaki is spurred on by the knowledge that he is playing a small part in a nascent interest among the Japanese in sustainable sushi. “We need proper stock management,” he says. “Collapse is just around the corner.” Off the coast of Oma, in the Tsugaru Strait separating Japan’s mainland from its northernmost island, Hokkaido, Sasaki makes his case: While attempts are being made to rescue bluefin tuna populations in seas thousands of miles away, nothing is being done to prevent Japan’s appetite for tuna sushi and sashimi from ripping through stocks along its own coastline.



Sasaki at sea off Oma

But Sasaki is not part of Japan's overfishing problem. Rather, he could be the solution. There are no trawler nets or lines coiled in heaps on his boat. He is one of barely 200 ippon-zuri (single-line) fishermen around Japan, who catch tuna sustainably using a combination of a rod and line, a basic sonar and occasional luck. Sasaki bitterly condemns net fishing, which he calls the enemy because it hauls in baby and smaller tuna, and is virtually unregulated. “We can’t do much damage with single lines,” he says. “We catch one at a time. This is the only way that tuna fishing can be sustainable.” Like all the fishermen here, he speaks of the “romanticism” of the tuna. “It’s big and powerful and it stirs boys’ imaginations. There’s no other fish like it.”

In an attempt to prevent the ippon-zuri tradition from dying out and to protect local stocks from being fished into oblivion, the local authorities have assigned the Tsugaru Strait for the exclusive use of Oma's 60 rod-and-line fishermen. Oma is one of just three places in Japan where the method survives.



Japanese line fishermen at sea

The move has met with mixed results. The ippon-zuri have become embroiled in a row with longline fishermen who violate the exclusion zone by using baited lines often several miles long. Elsewhere, trawlers, equipped with sophisticated sonar, plunder coastal waters, aided by the absence of official quotas and collusion between politicians and the powerful fishing lobby. High fuel prices, lower profit margins and stricter quotas in other parts of the world have created an irresistible urge for Japanese boats to take more bluefin from their own waters.

The yearly average catch for Oma is 2,500 tuna, worth about 1.6bn yen to the local economy. This is tiny compared with a few decades ago, says Hamabata Hirofumi, head of the town's fishing cooperative. "After the war, each boat returned with about half a dozen tuna every day," he says. "They were so cheap you'd have to sell 4kg of fish just to be able to afford a pack of cigarettes." Furukawa Akihiro, a longline fisherman for 13 years, admits he fears for the future: "My son wants to follow in my footsteps, but by the time he's old enough to go to sea, there won't be any fish left to catch."

In the Tsugaru Strait it is usual to see 150 boats fishing for tuna. Today, though, the weather has put most fishermen off. And after several hours at sea on an empty stomach, Sasaki is ready to call it a day. As darkness descends on Oma, another ippon-zuri fisherman who has had better luck returns. Watched by groups of children, six tuna weighing up to 100kg are unloaded and packed into wooden vats of crushed ice, ready to be driven to Tsukiji market in Tokyo before dawn. The fish may well fall under the gaze of Iida Toichiro, a wholesale trader who seeks out Oma tuna at auction. His family firm, Hicho, has been in business for almost 150 years.



Oma ship in high seas

He says many of his fellow traders know nothing about the provenance of their tuna. "They're just happy to buy the cheaper fish and make easy profits, but to do that they have to buy tuna that has come off a trawler," says Iida, who counts Tokyo's best sushi chefs among his clients. "Even some sushi restaurateurs don't know if their tuna is caught using nets or by more sustainable methods. It is about time they learned."



Sasaki in a sushi restaurant

In Iki-shi, Kukeya also fears for the future, explaining that the average age of the men in the local fisheries coop is 61 -- and membership is falling year by year. “In six or seven years the number of fishermen will halve,” he predicts. Many of the men work 12 or more hours a day to make up for the declining catch. Some have shifted to other fish like the saury or sardines in an effort to make a living.

“Last year I earned five million yen (about \$52,700); this year it’s down to about half,” estimates Harada Koji. “Nobody wants to really face up to what might happen,” says his colleague Yoshihara Hiroyuki (38), who like Harada has a young family. “We joke about it, but if something doesn’t change we won’t be here in ten years, and we don’t know how to do anything else.”

The ripples from the crisis around Japan’s coastline are already being felt on the nation’s restaurant tables. Some sushi chefs have switched to using alternative fish and ingredients, a move that made worldwide headlines and a smug editorial in the New York Times, which said Japan is “merely reaping the whirlwind it and other nations have sowed.” The newspaper called the tuna drought “a wakeup call to consumers.” Some restaurants outside the country have already removed the bluefin from menus.

Few Japanese want to contemplate the disappearance of tuna, but unless the country takes drastic action, they may have no choice, warns Sasaki. He says alternatives to fishing, such as raising fish artificially are making the problem worse because they entail robbing the seas of young stocks. “We have to learn to hunt sustainably and eat less,” he says. “There is just no other solution.”

Sidebar

The Japanese eat 600,000 tonnes of tuna a year - about a third of the total fished worldwide, and about three-quarters of the total bluefin fished worldwide. In 2006, Japan imported 44,000 tonnes of bluefin, just over half of it from the east Atlantic and Mediterranean. According to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, about 61,000 tonnes of bluefin tuna were caught in these seas last year - more than double the permitted catch of 29,500 tonnes. The commission has set a target of 25,500 tonnes by 2010, but many experts believe this should be nearer 15,000 tonnes. The Blue Ocean Institute's guide says bluefin tuna should be avoided altogether. Some restaurants, such as the Moshi Moshi chain in the UK, have removed bluefin from their menus.

Previous versions of this article appeared in The Guardian newspaper ("Still Hooked: Time Runs Out for Japan's Dangerous Obsession with the Bluefin") on Nov. 18, 2008, and in The Independent ("Japan's Sushi Famine," Nov. 22, 2008). Justin McCurry is The Guardian's Tokyo correspondent. He provided photographs from Oma for this article. David McNeill writes for The Independent and other publications, including The Irish Times and The Chronicle of Higher Education. He is a Japan Focus coordinator.

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