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The plight of the bluefin tuna

Maybe there aren't plenty of fish in the sea

Kerry Peters & Emily Buck — The Xaverian Weekly (St. Francis Xavier University)



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ANTIGONISH, N.S. (CUP) — Having both spent the majority of our lives as land-locked city girls, we excitedly jumped in a taxi on Sept. 28, the second day of this year's bluefin tuna season in Nova Scotia, and made the 32 kilometre trek from Antigonish to Ballantyne's Cove.

Weighing in at an average of 660 pounds and over six feet in length, bluefin tuna are truly magnificent creatures, and our goal was to see one for ourselves.

Upon our arrival at the harbour, we befriended Billy Bond, a fisherman from Canso, N.S. who had come to Ballantyne's Cove for its advantageous tuna fishing location. Bond had just arrived at the harbour with a bluefin in tow, which would turn out to be the biggest catch of the day, weighing in at 1,150 pounds.

Bond had caught a tuna the previous day as well, and was understandably happy considering that in a two-day season a fisherman is only allowed to catch one tuna per day.

For most people familiar with fishing or hunting, a two-day season seems remarkably short. The length of the season reflects concerns expressed by environmental groups, scientists and even the United Nations regarding the decline of bluefin tuna stocks.

According to the *New York Times*, the adult bluefin tuna stock has experienced a 72 per cent decline over the last 50 years, and by some estimates, there may be only 9,000 tuna left in the North American stock.

This rapid decline in population can be largely attributed to overfishing, and as observers of the tuna fishing at Ballantyne's Cove, we found ourselves bearing witness to an event that has been at the centre of international debate.

Almost every bluefin tuna that is caught is sold to Japan for sushi. In an effort to meet Japanese demand, European fishermen are following bluefin schools from the Mediterranean Sea into the high seas. This area of the ocean is a virtual no-man's land in the sense that it is owned by no one and is governed by largely feeble multi-national agreements.

According to the Sea Around Us project of the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre, catches from the high seas have risen by 700 per cent in the last half-century, and much of that increase is represented by tuna catches.

Furthermore, even when tuna do leave the high seas and enter one nation's territorial waters, they remain under the foggy international jurisdiction of poorly enforced tuna treaties. With the tuna population increasingly threatened, talks of a tuna moratorium have been initiated, but the United Nations have not yet added the bluefin tuna to their list of endangered species.

Bluefin tuna fishing in Canada is tightly controlled and heavily monitored. Kim MacDonald, who runs the fisherman's co-operative at Ballantyne's Cove is adamant that Canadian fishermen catch bluefin tuna in a sustainable and conscientious manner.

Restrictions about the type of gear used, the size of tuna allowed to be caught, the areas that are allowed to be fished in and the number of fish allowed to be pulled out of the water per day are enforced in Nova Scotia by Atlantic Catch Data, Ltd.

On Sept. 28, Ian Macmullan was the ACD dockside monitor at Ballantyne's Cove.

He explained to us that dockside monitors are responsible for compiling statistics about the tuna, such as the weight of the fish and the date it was caught, as well as tagging the fish before it is shipped out of the country.

This tagging process allows Canada to track every bluefin tuna from catch to market, and ensures that all tuna that is shipped out of Canada has been verified by the ACD.

At-sea coverage is also often employed in Canada to enforce compliance with fishing regulations. During bluefin tuna season in Canada, only one hook per boat is allowed in the water at a time, and fishermen are only allowed to catch one tuna fish per day of the season.

The length of the tuna season varies according to the total allowable catch allotted to Canada each year by the

International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, Canada's total allowable catch for 2009 was 505 tonnes.

This allotment is spread between various fleets all around Canada based on average historical landings of those fleets. According to Bond, the bluefin quota for the jurisdiction that includes Ballantyne's Cove was 49.87 tonnes for this season.

Bond explained that when you take into consideration how many individual fishermen fish out of each harbour in the same jurisdiction as Ballantyne's Cove, and that most tuna weigh in over 500 pounds, it is easy to see how a 49.87 tonne allotment would run out in just two days.

Although Canadian fishermen follow strict rules, overfishing bluefin persists in the open waters and bluefin spawning grounds have been put in jeopardy with the recent oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

According to the CBC, data released by ICAAT in October shows that at least 20 per cent of this year's juvenile bluefin tuna died in the oil spill and any eggs that may have come into contact with the oil will not hatch.

It may take years before the effects of the disaster in the Gulf of Mexico on the bluefin stocks will be fully understood.

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