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Pacific fisheries seek closer links to consumers

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By Robin Paxton

TASHKENT (Reuters) - Tuna fishers in the Pacific Ocean should develop closer links to consumers in Europe and the United States to bolster their fragile economies and protect threatened fish stocks, a leading trader said on Saturday.

Henk Brus, managing director of Netherlands-based trading company Atuna, said fishermen should also use better technology and wider nets to allow tuna to live longer before catching them, ensuring bigger profits and more sustainable fish stocks.

"It's food forever -- as long as you do not exterminate it," Brus told a seminar on global food security at the Asian Development Bank's annual meeting in the Uzbek capital Tashkent.

Overfishing has led to the depletion of stocks worldwide and is of particular concern in Asia, which consumes approximately two-thirds of the world's catch, said Rashid Sumaila, director of fisheries at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

Delegates at the seminar said excessive subsidies and illegal fishing were among the main causes of depleted stocks.

Brus said a new initiative to link Western consumers with a group of eight Pacific island nations, which together hold about 25 percent of global tuna stocks, would be a step toward boosting sustainability.

He said about 300,000 metric tonnes, or 7 percent of the world's supply of tuna, from countries such as Nauru and Kiribati could be certified by the independent Marine Stewardship Council by May 2011 under a programme officially launched last week.

The eight Parties to the Nauru Agreement (PNA) would connect more directly with retailers through a tracking system that will display a serial number on canned tuna sold in the West.

"A small island nation and a retailer are motivated to work in a sustainable way. The rest of the supply chain is not so motivated," he said.

He cited the example of Thailand, which he said leads the world in canned tuna production even though it fishes relatively little of its own and consumption rates of canned tuna are low.

"A PNA nation should connect directly with the retailer. It will help them get control over their own resource," Brus said.

WIDER NETS

John White, development director of the Marine Stewardship Council, said such schemes had an impact when major retailers made a commitment to promoting the sale of certified fish.

Brus said the PNA nations -- which also include Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Palau and Tuvalu -- would also benefit from using wider nets to allow the tuna they fish to live longer.

A yellowfin tuna that grows to four years old would weigh an average 79 kg (174 pounds) and fill 290 cans of tuna, he said, while a 10-month old yellowfin weighing 1.8 kg would fill only four. He said traditional fishing methods "collect the whole ecosystem ... which is also a threat to the environment."

Some delegates said more must also be done to stimulate demand for tuna in Asian economies, and called on the Asian Development Bank to find ways to help ensure subsidies to the industry were better allocated to promote sustainable fishing.

(Editing by Keiron Henderson)

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