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## The Strategist

# Selling the Future: Bluefin Auction Charts Our Decline

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Every freshman economics student, and anyone who has ever bought or sold something, quickly learns that when something is limited in supply its price will be high. And therein lies much of what is wrong with mainstream economics and all those who clamor for "market-based" solutions to environmental and social problems. Exhibit A in my argument is the Japanese bluefin tuna auction. Let me explain.

Early last month, a 752-pound bluefin tuna was sold at auction for \$396,000, the highest price ever paid for raw seafood (that's \$526.60 per pound, if you're doing the math). The price topped the previous record by more than \$100,000 and comes at a time when tuna populations around the world are falling precipitously. Between 1976 and 2006, global stocks fell 90% due to overfishing. So the economic fundamentals play out nicely; fewer numbers of a desired product leads to increased demand and an increase in price. A thin slice of the record tuna will command \$40 in Tokyo or Hong Kong. The problem is that a day of reckoning is fast approaching, a day when the last bluefin is caught, flash-frozen at sea, and sold. When that happens (and in the absence of a profound behavioral and cultural shift in awareness and not a little luck, it will) we not only say goodbye to one of the miracles of marine evolution, we cross yet another threshold in our species' inexorable destruction of the ecosystem that is our home. Removal of the bluefin accelerates a domino effect within the oceanic food web – an effect we do not understand well. It is a frightening case study of John Muir's observation that when you tug on a single thing in nature you find that it is connected to the rest of the world. It is also, it must be said, another in a too-long list of cock-ups in the realm of environmental "management".

While my focus here is on the treatment of the bluefin tuna as a key marker of our society's unsustainability, it is important to note that humans are rapidly vacuuming up other major fisheries as well. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that more than 70% of the world's major fish stocks have been dangerously exploited, 9-10% of which have been fully depleted or are recovering from depletion. Meanwhile, less than 0.1% of the world's oceans are designated as marine reserves closed to fishing. From a policy perspective this makes no sense. But then, the political, economic and cultural currents that pulse beneath the niceties of global fisheries management discussions are something to behold. Let us return to the bluefin tuna to see just how warped it can be.

Over forty years ago it was clear that Atlantic bluefin tuna in particular were on a downward spiral. In response, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) was formed in 1969. The problem is that it has become common practice for member nations of the commission to set bluefin catch allocations **well above** the limits that the commission's own scientists recommend. This has led some observers, in the blackest of humors, to re-brand ICCAT the International Conspiracy to Catch All Tuna. Surveying the most recent round of ICCAT posturing in a November 27, 2010 article appropriately titled "As nations bicker, bluefin nears extinction", *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, grimly summarized the paralytic state of affairs at a policy level:

*The species is flirting so closely to extinction that they should not be harvested at all, according to some scientists. But the lucrative fishery is so entrenched that no nation is willing to pay the price of taking a stand.*

Daniel Pauly, principal investigator of the Sea Around Us Project at the University of British Columbia, deftly cuts to the chase when commenting on the state of international fisheries management and ICCAT's deliberations about tuna quotas in particular:

*While many people still view fisheries as a romantic, localized activity pursued by rugged individuals, the reality is that for decades now, numerous fisheries are corporate operations that take a mostly no-fish-left-behind approach to our oceans until there's nowhere left to go. As far as the [tuna] science is concerned, it is not a controversial issue. The species is in great danger, is not rebuilding. Every year, one is more worried that it will lead to a total collapse. The quota should be zero.*

The quota should be zero. Would that it were so. But that would run counter to the way in which humans interact with nature. Indeed, ever since we first appeared on Earth, we have been disrupting the environment by transforming the landscape, creating pollution, and most especially, by overexploiting other species. Unlike all other animals, we long ago ceased to live with nature but outside of it. And this, in turn, has led to the greatest loss of species since dinosaurs walked the Earth – what some professional biologists call the Sixth Extinction. What is troubling, to put it mildly, is that the great mass extinctions of the geologic past were all caused by physical events that lay outside normal climatic and other physical disturbances. The Sixth Extinction, what is happening to us and our ecosystem now, on our watch, is the first recorded global extinction event that has a biotic, rather than a physical cause. As The Royal Society recently put it, "anthropogenic activities, including overexploitation, habitat loss and climate change, are currently causing profound transformations in ecosystems and unprecedented loss of biological diversity".

So, what is to be done? Will the bluefin tuna be our bete noir? Will we fall into the trap of fishing "down the web" and ultimately destroy the oceans and ourselves? Or will we turn things around? The answer is by no means clear. Life recovered after the five extinctions of the past only after the cause of the extinction event disappeared or dissipated. So, we can continue on the path to our own extinction, or we can modify our behavior toward the global ecosystem of which we are a part – even if we behave as if we aren't. Carl Safina, one of the world's most astute observers of oceanic health, is clear about "what" needs to be done with respect to fisheries:

*Answers to ocean recovery lie in fishing at a pace slower than fish can breed, farming seafood less destructively and giving consumers information to vote their conscience with their wallet.*

The "how" is an altogether different proposition. Human society has been here before, many times during our brief tenure on Earth and we consistently fail to read the warning signs accurately, or worse, we do read them and simply choose to ignore the signs. And so it is that we keep bidding up the price of bluefin tuna, while doing so only accelerates this species' doom.

If we are to chart a different path from our predecessors, a better path, a path that doesn't sell our future, we would do well to seek a visceral connection with the world – much as the hunter-gatherer societies of our ancestry did (and in isolated pockets of the world, still do). These societies lived not on, but "in" the earth; they understood at a deeply personal, resonant level what it is to "fish at a pace slower than fish can breed". More to the point, they had a reverence for the animals they killed for food. At risk of stating the obvious, I see no such reverence in the bluefin tuna "harvest" and auction. David Abrams describes this kind of reverence well in his compelling new book, *Becoming Animal*, and makes the case that modern humans who have lost or forgotten the connection to the land should insert an "I" before the "E" in Earth to remind us that we live "in" the earth, as part of nature. Wade Davis made a similar, and being Davis, magisterial

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argument in *The Wayfinders*.

It has been said that the most exciting words on the maps of ancient knowledge were *terra incognita*, unknown territory.

It is worth remembering that white explorers who were in many cases quite literally "lost" wrote those words. The indigenous peoples and cultures they discovered, however, knew how to find their way, knew how to live like they planned on staying. It is to these ancient ways of knowing that we should now turn. Yes, science has a role, but as a complement to ancient wisdom - the wisdom that knows Julia Butterfly Hill's question, "Where is away?" remains as compellingly urgent as ever. There is no "away" - plastic bags foul Midway Island and the birds who try to live there; rivers of pollution spoil our water, land and air; and species like the bluefin go extinct.