

## The Tragic Tale Of The Last Tuna

**At current rates, the Mediterranean bluefin will soon be commercially extinct.**

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*France scores high over all but fails to protect marine wildlife.*

The dozen-or-so Libyan tuna boats moored in the French Mediterranean port of Sète are a bitter reminder to French fisherman Denis Biascamano of a wrecked career and an industry gone bad. The boats carry Libyan flags, but it's common knowledge that they are French—captains, crews and capital. With tuna hard to find, Libyan waters are compelling: tuna are more abundant, and what few police patrol the sea can be bribed, says Biascamano. After years of making a decent living, Biascamano recently quit the "dirty business" of fishing. "We lost a lot of money the last two years," he says.

Mediterranean fishermen are hurting: stocks of bluefin tuna, by far the sea's most economically important fish, are dangerously low. Although many countries share the blame, the chief culprit, say fisheries experts, is France. Its annual quota accounts for one fifth the entire legal quota of Atlantic tuna for all countries. Factor in illegal catches, and France's take climbs to about one third of all Atlantic tuna caught last season, according to Greenpeace. When it comes to bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean, "France is the worst," says French biologist Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia.

That might sound strange for a country that scores 10th overall on Yale and Columbia's Environmental Performance Index. France does well on many measures but sets aside no significant ocean tracts for preserving wildlife (it gets a zero in "marine protected areas" along with nations like Haiti and Nigeria). And although France scores well in the "marine trophic index"—countries with small average fish sizes score poorly, an indication that they have fewer breeders—the weight of tuna is dropping. Eight years ago Biascamano's average tuna weighed 140 kilograms; last year the figure was 80kg. Also, the EPI doesn't take into account France's abuse of the stocks of other countries, such as Libya's.

Bluefin tuna is one of the world's most expensive fish—a 100-gram serving can easily top €25—largely driven by Japan's demand for sushi. With catches declining, many fishing operations have taken on

debt, which gives them a motivation to stretch or break the rules. The current rate of overfishing is driving Mediterranean bluefin tuna to the brink of commercial extinction. Scientists at the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, the Madrid regulatory organization, estimate that the sea can sustain an annual catch of 15,000 tons. The legal quota, hammered out in consultation with politicians and business leaders from 43 countries, is double that figure. The actual catch last year was 54,000 tons—more than *triple* the recommended quota. "The risk of collapse is serious," says César Deben Alfonso, head of fisheries at the European Commission.

The tuna fishery's latest downward spiral started three years ago, when Libya expanded its sovereign fishing waters fivefold. Protests from Paris proved fruitless. With France's tuna waters in the Gulf of Lyon fished out, and yield sharply down near the Balearic Islands, French boats headed to Libyan waters, where quotas are almost meaningless. Some vessels sell fish at sea, sidestepping port controls. Rogue boats sell tuna caught over their quotas to "reefer" freezer boats bound for Asia, or to fishing boats with unmet quotas, a trick known as laundering. Fishermen have also begun to deliver tuna live in undersea cages to nonfishing vessels, which take the fish, mostly underweight juveniles, to offshore pens, where they're fattened for sale.

The European Commission recently chastised France for nearly reaching its quota 10 days into the season, which began in May. That didn't stop the French government from speeding up a \$310 million aid package to the fishing industry, after fishermen took to the streets of Paris to protest high fuel prices and taxes.

Despite its green record, France still can't seem to find the political will to curb rampant overfishing.

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