

Raw deal for tuna stocks

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Sushi chef Kim Hong-Min gently fillets a coral-coloured salmon with the menacingly long, thin blade of a Japanese knife.

The flesh glistens, marbled with stripes of white fat that will soon top mounds of rice and melt gently in a sushi lover's mouth.

It's lunchtime at Japan Sushi, one of dozens of sushi restaurants that exist virtually side by side on Bloor St. in Toronto's Annex neighbourhood.

"Sushi chefs are very earnest," Kim said. "And Canadian customers know their fish, they study their fish."

But on World Ocean Day, Canadians are being asked to consider their relationship with oceans, whether it be water or fish consumption.

"Fish consumption is growing worldwide," said Rashid Sumaila, with the University of British Columbia's fisheries centre. "As our income increases, more people are opting to eat fish."

While market researcher NPD Group Canada doesn't track the number of sushi restaurants in the country, data shows that Japanese-style restaurants have grown 10% from last year, while sushi as a menu item grew by 1%.

The World Wildlife Fund says tuna stocks are at risk of commercial extinction due to illegal and unregulated fishing. A recent WWF report singles out the Atlantic bluefin tuna as being "severely overfished" and pins the blame on demand for high-end sushi and sashimi.

"(This) could be the year that the magnificent bluefin tuna, the fish behind the finest sushi in the world, disappears from the Mediterranean," a statement by the WWF reads. "To avoid a disaster comparable in scale to that of the collapse of cod stocks on the Canadian Grand Banks in the 1990s, we need governments to take urgent action."

It's a dire warning that harkens back to the ugly blight on Canada's fishing record, when in 1992 the government was forced to close the fishery in Newfoundland, throwing 30,000 out of work. Cod stocks have never recovered.

"The cod stocks serve as a poster child for fishing sustainability around the world," Sumaila said. "Worldwide, (Newfoundland) is given as an example of how we mismanage our resources."

The WWF says that in the last three years, about 40% of the eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna catch is believed to have come from illegal fishing areas -- and formerly undisturbed breeding grounds -- in the eastern Mediterranean.