

Japan still hooked on king of fish

Tue, Nov 25, 2008

As bluefin tuna becomes increasingly rare, coastal fishermen are facing the extinction of their livelihood, writes David McNeill in Ishiki, Japan

ON A gloomy day pregnant with rain and the weight of past expectations, Minoru Nakamura is welcomed back to port like a conquering hero. Three family generations, including Nakamura's father Toshiaki and newborn child Misaki wait ashore, smiles wide and cameras primed, as his boat sails into harbour.

"Good for him," says a beaming Terutaka Okubo, head of the local fishing co-operative. "That's wonderful to see."

On this remote island off southern Japan, where rusting boats wait for fishermen who increasingly stay at home, few sights excite more than Nakamura's precious cargo: a 172kg bluefin tuna, splayed across the deck of his small trawler.

Dubbed Japan's king of fish, at peak prices Nakamura's single catch will fetch more than 1.5 million yen (€12,100) at the world's biggest fish market in Tsukiji, Tokyo.

By the time it is carved up and sold as thousands of sushi, sashimi and steak cuts to restaurants across the city, it will be worth at least three times that much - the price of a luxury family car.

But today's celebrations are likely to fade as fast as the watery afternoon sun. Among many of Ishiki's 32,000 people, one in eight of whom depend on the sea to survive, the talk is of one thing: the extinction of their livelihood.

"In 40 years on a boat I've never seen it so bad," says Yoshiju Kukeya. "Nakamura-san is lucky today. The fish are not there anymore."

Atsushi Sasaki, a fisherman-turned-conservationist who sounds increasingly desperate alarm bells about Japan and the world's free-falling tuna stocks, speaks of imminent extinction. "If the situation continues, it is inevitable that tuna will disappear from the seas," he says.

Sasaki is not alone. A string of doomsday predictions about the fate of the Pacific tuna forced Japan's largest fisheries co-op this summer to announce an unprecedented suspension of operations.

Last week, an international preservation group meeting in Morocco warned that once-teeming stocks of bluefin tuna in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea have plummeted by 90 per cent and may shortly be put on the official endangered list.

Most of the blame has been heaped on Japan, which consumes about three-quarters of the world's bluefin, according to Greenpeace, and increasingly imports what it can't catch (about 44,000 tonnes a year).

But the global spread of healthy Mediterranean and Japanese cuisine and exploding consumption in China and Russia are also helping to drive the species off the extinction cliff.

Rocketing prices for a fish that until 30 years ago was considered so worthless by many trawlers that it was thrown back into the sea or converted into cat food have attracted the attention of the Italian and Russian mafia, who control much of the Mediterranean trade, according to Daniel Pauly, one of the world's top

fisheries experts.

"Most Japanese people have no idea where their tuna is coming from," he says. "If they did, they might eat a lot less."

Around the coast of Japan in fishing communities like Ishiki, boats are returning to port empty. Co-op manager Okubo shows a spreadsheet in his office charting the stunning decline in tuna catches: down to one-quarter of the 2005 figure. Nakamura's haul is the first 150kg-plus tuna to be caught this year; last year there were more than 100.

"It began a few years back but it is now really striking," he says. "Smaller fish are coming in because they're all that are left."

Sasaki explains the implications: "Tuna under 36kg are incapable of producing babies, so the fishermen are cutting their own throats by catching immature fish."

But they need to survive. "It's a vicious circle: the more younger fish they take, the more likely it will be that they go extinct."

Tough and sinewy at 61, with the leathery skin of a veteran seadog, Sasaki has circled Japan in his 15m (49ft) trawler on a one-man research mission that has made him deeply pessimistic that voluntary suspensions will succeed. "The government must bring in much tougher regulations. At the moment, it's a free-for-all," he says.

Later, he sails his boat into the choppy seas an hour off Ishiki, to a narrow channel where Pacific tuna shoals have navigated for millennia - south in the winter and north in summer.

The area, one of the Pacific's key natural signals of the health of tuna stocks, is crowded with boats like his, sinking single lines into the sea.

Tsushima Sasaki bitterly condemns net fishing, which he calls "the enemy" because they haul in babies and smaller tuna, and are virtually unregulated.

"We can't do much damage with single lines," he says as he rigs up the first of several rods.

"This is the only way that tuna fishing can be sustainable. We catch one at a time."

Like all the fishermen here, he speaks of the "romanticism" of the tuna. "It's big and powerful and it stirs boys' imaginations. There's no other fish like it."

Seven hours later, he returns to port empty-handed, his worst fears again confirmed. "If the fish are no longer there, Japan will starve," he says.

The disappearing tuna and rising fuel prices are keeping fishermen at home and putting youngsters off the industry, imperilling its future.

Kukeya says the average age of the men in the co-op is 61 and membership is falling year by year. "In six or seven years the number of fishermen will halve," he predicts.

Many of the men work 12 or more hours a day to make up for the declining catch. Some have shifted to other fish like sauries or sardines in an effort to make a living. "Last year I earned five million yen [€10,400]; this year it's down to about half," estimates Koji Harada.

"Nobody wants to really face up to what might happen," says his colleague, Hiroyuki Yoshihara (38), who

like Harada has a young family. "We joke about it but if something doesn't change we won't be here in 10 years, but we don't know how to do anything else."

The ripples from the crisis around Japan's coastline are already being felt on the nation's restaurant tables. Some sushi chefs have switched to using alternative fish and ingredients, a move that made worldwide headlines and a smug editorial in the New York Times, which said Japan is "merely reaping the whirlwind it and other nations have sowed". The newspaper called the tuna drought "a wake-up call to consumers".

Some restaurants outside the country have already removed the bluefin from menus.

Few Japanese want to contemplate the disappearance of the beloved dinner-table staple, but unless the country takes drastic action, they may have no choice, warns Sasaki.

He says alternatives to fishing, such as raising tuna artificially, are making the problem worse because they entail robbing the seas of young stocks.

"We have to learn to hunt sustainably and eat less," he says. "There is just no other solution."

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