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From the Los Angeles Times

## Pacific nations ban tuna boats to stop stock collapse

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Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, and six other Pacific nations banned tuna boats from an area of ocean almost the size of Alaska to save the fish from a repeat of the collapse of Atlantic cod fisheries in the 1980s.

The island nations prohibited fishing boats from two areas of the Pacific Commons, stretches of international waters surrounded by coastal waters belonging to the countries. The ban went into effect yesterday to prevent destruction of bigeye and yellowfin tuna stocks and sustain an industry worth \$3 billion a year in the Pacific.

Governments and fishing companies aren't doing enough to prevent the decline of tuna stocks as they put the demands of the fishing industry and consumers above the sustainability of marine life, conservationists say.

"The balance of power between the fishing fleets and tuna has shifted too far in favor of the fleets," Callum Roberts, a marine conservation biologist at the University of York in England, said in a telephone interview. "We are still catching too many fish."

Lower catches may tighten supplies in Japan, the main market for the region's fish and the world's largest for sashimi-grade tuna, where prices are rising due to depleted supply, rising fuel costs and competition from the U.S., European Union and China.

The wholesale price of bigeye tuna in Tokyo rose to 930 yen in April from 774 yen three years earlier, while the price of yellowfin rose to 700 yen from 538 in the same period, according to the latest statistics from Japan's agriculture ministry.

### Rising Fuel Costs

Rising fuel costs may force about 30 percent of the world's long-line tuna boats to suspend operations, Kyodo News reported last month, citing the Organization for the Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries, a Japanese fishing industry body.

About half the global tuna catch is from the Pacific, mostly from around the islands of the Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu.

Bigeye tuna and yellowfin tuna, used for sushi and sashimi, can weigh as much as 200 kilograms and reach 2.5 meters (8.2 feet) in length. Based on April wholesale prices in Tokyo, a single adult fish can fetch as much as 186,000 yen (\$1,725).

### Failing Measures

The states imposed the fishing ban after the Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, which governs the region's stocks of migratory fish including tuna, failed to strengthen conservation measures at its annual meeting in December.

To enforce the ban, tuna vessels wanting licenses to fish in the countries' exclusive economic zones, also rich in tuna stocks, will have to agree not to enter the protected areas.

The group also made observers mandatory on vessels operating in their territories and banned the use of fish aggregating devices, or buoys used to attract tuna and blamed for over-fishing of juvenile fish, for three months a year.

Using marine reserves to sustain stocks of migratory fish is still disputed in the scientific community. Some tuna have been proven to travel as far as 45,000 miles in 16 months, according to Tagging of Pacific Predators, making them difficult to protect.

Conservation areas along migratory routes and near sea mounts, where tuna spawn and feed, will help replenish stocks, Ussif Rashid Sumaila, Director of the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Economics Research Unit, said by telephone.

Greenpeace International, which wants marine reserves to cover 40 percent of the world's high seas, said the resolution needs to be backed by all members of the Western & Central Pacific Fisheries Commission as the island states alone can't afford to pay for monitoring.

### 'Wild West'

"It really is the wild west out there," said Greenpeace oceans campaigner Sari Tolvanen, who recently returned from a two-month expedition to document illegal fishing vessels in the region. Taiwanese long-liners and Philippines' purse seines are engaged in illegal fishing in the area, she said.

"A large amount of fish is being taken from the area without any record of it being caught," she said.

Global tuna stocks have declined since the introduction of industrial-scale fishing in the 1940s. The global catch surged ten times to more than 4 million tons a year between 1950 and 2004, data from the United Nations shows.

Scientists say over-fishing has brought tuna stocks in the Mediterranean and other areas to the brink of collapse. The Pacific yellowfin catch fell to \$1.1 billion in 2004 from \$1.9 billion three years earlier, Sumaila said.

### Collapse?

Scientists and conservations are concerned about a collapse similar to the demise of Atlantic cod fisheries off Canada, which haven't recovered even after a total fishing ban in 1992.

"You don't want stocks to get into really depressed states before you take action," Sumaila said.

Introducing reserves will cause a decline in catch in the short-term, Sumaila said. Closing 20 percent of the high seas to all types of fishing would reduce catches by 1.8 percent, which would be offset in future as healthier fisheries become more profitable, he said.

Kyosuke Suganuma, a spokesman for Tohto Suisan Kabushiki Kaisha, one of seven auction houses at the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo, said he doesn't expect a big decline in supply because most of the fish his company handles comes from the Mediterranean, Mexico and Australia.

People need to pay more for fish if the world's fisheries are going to be saved, the University of York's Roberts said.

"The environmental cost on the ecosystem of the wholesale removal of predatory stocks like tuna is simply not being measured in the price of fish," he said.

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