

## Bluefin Tuna: An Indicator Species

BY RAY GRIGG, COURIER-ISLANDER APRIL 30, 2010

Bluefin tuna are a magnificent species. Their compact bodies are masses of muscle and speed. Weighing up to 500 kg and reaching swimming speeds of 80 km/hr, they are master predators, global migrators, and one of the prime targets of the world's industrial fishing fleets. As such, they are an indicator species -- of our ability to responsibly manage our planet's precious marine resources.

So far, we are registering abject failure. Bluefin tuna are close to commercial collapse due to incessant over-fishing and, unless a moratorium is established immediately, they are on the verge of extinction.

But a moratorium is unlikely to happen. As stocks of the fish collapse, demand is far higher than supply. Prices are skyrocketing. A 70 kg bluefin can sell for \$15,000 and a record \$173,000 was recently paid for a prime fish in Japan's Tsukiji market. The bluefin is now so valuable that spotter planes scour the oceans for the last of the diminishing schools and satellites are tracking them by locating algae blooms that attract their feedfish. Money is spurring the race to catch the last of these incredible fish. (Other tuna species, with the exception of the yellowfin, are in reasonable health.)

The plunder seems unstoppable. Despite frequent and dire warnings from scientists, the frenzied harvesting of bluefin goes on. The blackmarket is worth more than \$7 billion per year (New Scientist, Nov. 14/09) and the official body in charge of regulating catch, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), seems incapable of slowing even the legal harvest.

A March meeting in Doha of the United Nations' Convention on the International Trade In Endangered Species (CITES) failed to establish UN regulatory controls for bluefin tuna. The 175-nation body could not agree on an Appendix I and Appendix II classification for these fish. (Appendix II requires monitoring and a guarantee of sustainability, while Appendix I bans cross-border commerce, a constraint that would slow the legal catch of bluefin.) Canada, because of a small bluefin fishery in the Maritimes, voted against these constraints, together with Japan, China and other fishing nations. Dr. Daniel Pauly, a University of British Columbia professor with an internationally recognized expert on marine ecologies, says bluefin tuna are now in the same situation as the Newfoundland cod fishery just before its final and unrecoverable collapse.

The methodical tracking, catching and monitoring of bluefin tuna says much about the sophistication of modern fisheries science. But it says much more about us. We know with certainty exactly what will happen if we continue to fish these collapsing tuna populations. The science is sound and unquestioned. The regulatory mechanisms are in place. We are not awaiting new technologies to solve a difficult problem. We just have to stop doing what we are presently doing. But we seem unable to act -- and Canada, unfortunately, is a contributor to this paralysis.

In this sense, bluefin tuna is an indicator species -- an indicator of who we are as a species. If we can't control our catch of bluefins, what other examples of failed self-control can we find? We have no lack of choices: new or expanding coal mines, open net-pen salmon farms, old-growth logging, destruction of tropical forests, addictions to smoking and narcotics, emissions of greenhouse gases, rampant consumer and industrial wastes.... We seem to have an almost uncontrollable compulsion to persist in behaviour even when we know the consequences are unsustainable, destructive, costly, toxic, foolish and, ultimately, counter-productive by every measure except immediate gratification. History understands explanations but it never allows for excuses.

Bluefin tuna fishing is an apt metaphor for how we use our planet's resources -- we are catching too many fish without considering limits or consequences. We seem to be so focused on the activity and the immediate benefits that we don't consider the eventual outcome. But this is how we consume and pollute, as if no end were attached to the resources we can take and the wastes we can emit.

Overcoming the momentum of this destructive, narrow-minded and self-centred behaviour has become the most important psychological challenge confronting us in our history as a species.

Will we be able to think and act beyond short-term gain?

Can we change ourselves fast enough to avert the looming catastrophe of limits?

Bluefin tuna just happens to be an illuminating example of our failing because the problem is so clear, the solution is so simple and our ineptitude is so obvious.

Biologists predict that within two years we will not be able to find Mediterranean bluefin tuna -- their size in the last 10 years has fallen from an average of 125 kg to 65 kg per fish, a sure sign of species distress. During the last 3,000 years of Mediterranean history, this species has been caught by ancient Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans. But when we are finished fishing them, they will be finished. Period. The end. And within a few more short years, we won't have any more of these magnificent fish to catch in the world's oceans.

After millions of years of successful evolution, they will either be too rare to find or their numbers will be too few for viability as a species.

More than just a beautiful and incredible creature, these iconic fish have become a reflection of our character -- of who we are and, perhaps, of what we will be.

Perhaps. If we don't change.