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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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### As nations squabble, bluefin is fished closer to extinction

By JESSICA LEEDER

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*Conservationists await the outcome of an international meeting in Paris, fearing politics will doom the tuna*

Inside a closed Paris meeting room, 48 nations will squabble late into the night over the declining stock of blue and silver-scaled gold.

The fate of Atlantic bluefin tuna, the most valuable fish in the sea, is the subject of an intense 10-day debate that wraps up on Saturday night and has pitted conservationism against a global industry that has fished the bluefin into endangerment.

Searching for balance between those two poles are delegations representing four dozen governments, including Canada, which owns rights to 495 of the 1,800 tons of Atlantic bluefin pulled out of the eastern Atlantic this year. All nations at the table have agreed to a pact of secrecy surrounding the annual negotiations over international catch limits on the fish, the largest of which weigh up to 500 kilograms and fetch \$100,000 at market in Japan.

The media blackout has helped to obscure an issue on which no country is prepared to lead: the red-fleshed Atlantic bluefins are flirting so closely with extinction that they should not be harvested at all, according to some scientists. But the lucrative fishery is so entrenched that no nation is expected to pay the price of taking a stand.

"There is no one who has the nerve to call this bluff and say 'What are we doing?' because they think they represent their fishery," Daniel Pauly, a fisheries expert at the University of British Columbia, said of delegates to the Paris meeting, called the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT).

"As far as the science is concerned, it is not a controversial issue. The species is in great danger, is not rebuilding. Every year, one is more worried that it will lead to a total collapse," he said, adding: "The quota should be zero."

It's in the politics of that notion that controversy comes in.

For years, members of ICCAT, created in 1969, have agreed to set bluefin allocations well above limits that the commission's own scientists have recommended (in 2008, the suggested total quota was 8,500 to 15,000 tonnes; members agreed on 22,000 tonnes). The commission has also done very little to ensure that nations comply with the quotas they help to set. In 2007, France was allotted about 5,500 tonnes, but reported netting about 10,000.

That disregard for quota, combined with increasing concern over the fate of Atlantic bluefin, led French prosecutors to launch a criminal investigation involving six well-known fishermen suspected of corruption and fraud.

But lax regulation across Mediterranean waters, the ground zero of the global bluefin harvest, has led to a black market in bluefin, 80 per cent of which ends up sold in Japan as sushi and sashimi. More than one out of three bluefin caught between 1998 and 2007 was fished illegally, feeding an illicit market worth \$400-million a year, according to a recently published investigation [<http://www.publicintegrity.org/treesaver/tuna/#-/treesaver/tuna/index.html>] by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists.

ICCAT, nicknamed the International Conspiracy to Catch All Tunas, is accused of abetting this by ignoring its scientists.

Canada, which has a reputation as one of the more responsible bluefin fishing nations because of its PEI-based rod-and-reel system (European nations fish with large nets called purse seines) has been outspoken about the need to get Mediterranean harvesting under control.

But Canada's virtuous reputation in the bluefin arena began to cloud over this year when it voted against an EU motion at the Convention of the International Trade in Endangered Species that would have temporarily banned international trade of Atlantic bluefin. Although a United Nations panel supported the ban due to low bluefin stocks (they have dropped more than 80 per cent since the 19th century), the motion was defeated.

ICCAT has agreed, over the past two years, to reduce the allowable bluefin catch. But it remains to be seen whether that trend will continue.

Both the EU and the United States have indicated support for further reduction. However, a person familiar with Canada's position at the Paris talks said Canadian delegates are unlikely to accept a reduction and will vote instead for the status quo.

That has soured bluefin advocates in a year that has been particularly tough on the fish, which spawn in only two known sites. One is the Gulf of Mexico. The BP oil rig Deepwater Horizon began gushing oil there around the start of spawning season.

"Canada, instead of taking the high ground as a member that has quota and saying, 'We shouldn't be driving the species to extinction,' wants to insist on having this quota ... for a few fish in PEI," said Dr. Pauly. He is frustrated at the global appetite for "a luxury product."

"If these fish disappear ... the fishermen can go after other species. Nobody is seizing the high ground," he said. "The species is going to be lost in the next decade simply because of stupidity."

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