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ENVIRONMENT



IMAGE: CHRISTOPHER PALA

Rescuing Our 'Ahi

Obama less interested in 'ahi than his predecessor?

CHRISTOPHER PALA | DEC 15, 2010 | [SHARE](#) [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

ENVIRONMENT / Two years ago, in the closing days of the Bush administration, American diplomats championed efforts by Pacific island nations to slow the overexploitation of the world's last major stocks of ahi by closing two large areas to industrial fishing and banning (for two months) a form of fishing that disproportionately affects young 'ahi.

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At the same venue last week, US officials were conspicuously silent as South Korea and Spain, represented by the European Union, attacked stronger measures made necessary by the ineffectiveness of the previous ones. This time, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission did not endorse the new measures. As of Jan. 1, only US ships will be fishing in an area the size of India and from which all others have effectively been excluded. As the number of days the other nations are allowed to fish per year is cut by nearly a third, the US fleet, courtesy of US taxpayers, can

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fish as much as it wants.

“The purse seiners are having a huge impact on Hawaii,” says William Aila, who describes himself as a native Hawaiian commercial fisherman. “They are fishing even more than the market can bear, and the warehouses are full of canned tuna. We used to have runs of juvenile ‘ahi from October to March, but here we are in December and we’ve only seen a few—and they’re smaller than usual.”

The measures adopted two years ago came as the commission’s own scientists warned that the stocks of bigeye, the most overfished species, were so diminished as to require an immediate 30 percent cut in take to avoid collapse. Yellowfin (which when young is hard to distinguish from bigeye, so both are known as ‘ahi in Hawai’i) and skipjack (aku), are not far behind (see sidebar).

That year, a group of eight island nations, the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, in whose waters 85 percent of canned tuna are fished, leveraged their contracts with the owners of the region’s 225 purse-seine vessels from such countries as Japan, Taiwan, China, Spain and the United States. They banned the aggregating devices, which increase the take of juveniles, for two months a year. They also closed two pockets on international waters that together are three times the size of California (see map), and forced all vessels to carry foreign observers and transponders that gave their positions at all times.

But the measures were largely ineffective, and the take actually increased by 30 percent. So the Nauru group in April took a bolder step and banned its licensees from fishing in an m-shaped area south of this area that is the size of India.

The previous closures were designed to rid the pockets of poachers, vessels that used the high-seas pockets to either fish in waters of countries for which they had no license or to illegally unload their catches to other vessels.

Far greater benefits possible

But the so-called Eastern High Seas closure will have far greater benefits. It will apply to purse-seiners, which are responsible for about three-quarters of the amount of tuna fished, on Jan. 1, and to long-liners in a few years.

“These are the most far-reaching ocean-conservation measures ever,” says Daniel Pauly, a leading fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia. “For the first time since man has been fishing out in the open oceans, we’re going to see a reversal of the decline of pelagic species.” Pauly predicts that because the individual tunas that choose to spend their whole lives inside the no-fishing area will survive in greater numbers than those who don’t, their offspring will have a genetic advantage over the rest.

Pauly explains that species have survived because at least parts of their ranges have been inaccessible to fishermen. “Now that fishing methods are much more effective, we need to create no-take zones so that we don’t exploit the whole range of any given species,” he explains. “In other words, a natural sustainability mechanism has to be replaced by a deliberate one to avoid having the species collapse.”

A tagging study in the Western Pacific found that about half the tuna spent their whole lives within 450 nautical miles. This is about the width of the new closed area, where scientists believe that the figure will be perhaps a third. The result will be a unique area of open ocean in which the density of blue-water fish will increase, and perhaps reach, historical pre-fishing levels. As the numbers of fast-breeding tuna rises, the scientists predict, other overfished species like sharks and billfish will be attracted to the area.

Even the timing is good: climate change increases the frequency of El Nino during years in which current changes shift nutrients from the Western Pacific to the Central Pacific, where the giant closure is located.

The area is also serendipitously located. Two years ago, just as the Bush administration diplomats were backing the Nauru group’s first closures, President George W. Bush himself used the Antiquities Act to name five islands bordering the latest closure the Marine National Monuments, the same status he gave the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in 2006.

These islands’ no-fishing area extend out 50 nautical miles, leaving each with a

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doughnut-shaped zone out to the 200-nautical-mile limit of US waters. These waters are accessible only to US purse-seiners, based in Samoa, and longliners based in Hawai'i. Closing fishing in these doughnut zones would extend the closure considerably.

"With the stroke of a pen, President Obama can turn the waters off all five islands into no-fishing areas, and he should," says Jay Nelson, head of the Global Ocean Legacy program of the Pew Environmental Group, who helped coordinate support for both Hawaiian Islands. "This would hugely improve the effectiveness of the closure; it would eventually become the world's biggest refuge for all marine life."

But the record of the Obama administration is not encouraging.

For the record

Under the South Pacific Tuna Treaty signed with 16 Pacific nations in 1987, long before the tuna commission was created, the United States gave development aid totaling \$18 million to 14 of the nations (Australia and New Zealand being the two exceptions). It also contributes more than half of the license fees purse seiners pay to the countries in which they fish, a \$7 million subsidy unmatched by any other country. In exchange, the US fleet, now limited to 40 vessels, can fish as much as it wants anywhere in the tuna commission's area, which includes waters belonging to island states and international waters including Eastern High Seas closure.

The number of vessels had fallen to 11 in 2007. This occurred just as alarms were being raised about the decline of the stocks, and the first attempts at restricting the size of the harvest were undertaken, that the United States allowed some two dozen Taiwanese purse-seiners to take up the U.S. flag. These ships operate entirely in the Western Pacific, sell their catch in Asia and create virtually no work for Americans. Asked repeatedly what benefits the United States reaped from allowing the Stars and Stripes to be used as a flag of convenience, William Gibbons-Fly of the US State Department (the lead official on the policy) has declined comment, as have other US officials.

"The US talks about conservation but behaves differently," Papua-New Guinea's fisheries director, Sylvester Pokajam, said at the time. At last week's meeting of the tuna commission, Pokajam, the spokesman for the Nauru group, added, "We will be very disappointed if the United States does not cooperate with us" in closing the Eastern High Seas.

Rough seas ahead

The treaty expires in June 2013 and is being renegotiated.

"How the closure is dealt with is part of our talks," says Charles Karnella, head of the US delegation to the commission.

Meanwhile, the treaty itself has become a thorny issue. In testimony to Congress a few months ago, Gibbons-Fly, who is director of the State Department's Office of Marine Conservation, said it serves "as a forum for cooperating with Pacific island parties on a range of issues, including conservation and management of the islands' fish stocks, fisheries enforcement cooperation and capacity-building."

But, he added, the whole package is "dependent on the extension of the treaty." In other words, he suggested, if the treaty is not extended in a manner acceptable to Washington, the US could cease all aid to and cooperation with the 17 countries.

Greenpeace Oceans Campaigner Philip Kline, a former commercial fisherman and expert on US fishing policy in the Pacific, says the United States is taking the wrong approach. "It's completely out of line for the Obama administration to use strong-arm tactics to negotiate a commercial treaty with a group of tiny, friendly nations," he said. "Conditions have completely changed since the treaty was signed," he added. Today, the United States, "instead of trying to intimidate them, should be helping them with our expertise in creating a system that reduces the catch while preserving their income."

Gibbons-Fly reported in his testimony that in 2009, just as the American fleet peaked at 38 vessels, the Nauru group asked the United States to voluntarily cut the number of fished days to 2,773, or slightly more than the number of days fished prior

to 2007, when the fleet was composed of 11 true American vessels.

“As you might guess, Mr. Chairman,” Gibbons-Fly said at the hearing, “the United States has resisted what would amount to an effort by one side to change unilaterally the terms of our existing and longstanding treaty.”

SOS (Save Our Sashimi)

In the past decade, fleets of industrial purse-seine ships, which can pull up 200 tons of tuna in a single net and can each take out 10,000 tons a year, have moved into the Western and Central Pacific oceans after depleting the tuna in the Eastern Pacific, Indian and Atlantic oceans. The results, unfortunately, speak for themselves.

Bigeye is the biggest tuna species and most prized for its texture and fattiness of its meat. Its top-grade toro (the fatty belly meat prized for its taste, texture and scarcity) sold for \$22.50 a pound at Tamashiro's last week. Today, only about 17 percent of the adult, spawning population remains and juvenile numbers are also down. About 80,000 tons are taken from the Central and Western Pacific oceans by longliners, who supply the fresh and frozen markets. The juvenile bigeyes are the size of adult skipjacks and like to swim with them. Purse-seiners target skipjack, but when they use floating platforms called Fish Aggregating Devices that attract fish, about 30 percent of their catch is juvenile bigeye. This adds another 80,000 tons a year to the bigeye catch. The devices allow purse-seiners to increase their average daily take to 30 tons from 20 tons. Solution: Ban the devices.

Yellowtails, slightly smaller than bigeyes, so resemble them when they're young that both are called 'ahi here. 'Ahi means fire, and according to William Aila, that's because when 'ahi are hooked, the line goes out so fast that a canoe's wood gunwales will start to smoke. In pre-contact Hawaii, control over areas where 'ahi could be fished was sometimes a *casus belli*. Their numbers are slightly less depleted than the number of bigeye tuna.

Skipjacks are important not only to lovers of tuna casseroles and aku poke, but also to the Japanese, who dry the meat (called katsuo) and use it as a cheap, basic food for soups and other dishes. Amazingly fecund, the skipjacks have finally started to take a nosedive.

“We are very concerned,” says Masanori Miyahara, head of the Japanese delegation to the tuna commission meeting last week. “The harvest has gone from 1 million tons in 2000 to 1.6 million tons this year.” Since purse-seiners began scooping up entire schools in the 1970s, the stock has fallen by half. A suggested solution by the Nauru group: Raise the per-day price of a fishing license, which will reduce the number of days the purse-seiners can fish and thus the amount of fish taken.

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