

Monday, 8th March 2010

Bluefin tuna

Is Malta's 'pot of gold' about to run out?

Malta's tuna penning industry was the focus of a stormy debate last week following the screening of a film on global fishing, *The End of the Line*, which argues that major species of edible fish are headed for extinction.

The film was shown to a packed theatre at St James Cavalier and was followed by a panel discussion, headed by Charles Clover, the award-winning British journalist on whose book the film is based.

It shows international tuna trade, in which Malta is a protagonist, as an unsustainable practice which sees wild bluefin tuna caught, fattened and eventually killed before even having the chance to spawn, therefore jeopardising the future resource.

Representatives of the industry turned up in full force for the screening and what followed was a turbulent exchange in which they contested scientists' claims that bluefin tuna faces extinction.

But Mr Clover referred to the consensus developing among a growing list of countries that the present situation will lead to a collapse of the species.

"With respect to bluefin tuna stocks, it is as if we visualise an endless pot of gold that never runs out, when in reality it's a finite biological resource that is scientifically proven to be running out."

The film comes at a sensitive time for the industry which this week is expecting the EU to announce its support for the listing of the species under Appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites), which would ban international trade in bluefin tuna.

The EU faced opposition against the ban from its Mediterranean members but eventually key countries such as France and Italy changed their position to support the move.

In fact, the EU has now expressed concern that the overfishing of the species is seriously depleting stocks.

But Malta and other states still oppose the ban. Along with Spain, Cyprus and Greece, which all have a stake in the trade, it argues that international trade in the species should not be banned but regulated by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), an intergovernmental fishery organisation.

During the debate, Resources Minister George Pullicino reiterated this position. But Mr Clover countered that ICCAT has been responsible for the management of stocks so far and it had failed miserably.

The rest of the panel consisted of Rashid Sumaila of the University of British Columbia, Craig Dahlgren of the Perry Institute and Caroline Muscat, assistant editor of *The Sunday Times*. Prof. Sumaila said the depletion of fish stocks was one of the factors leading to migration and pointed out that European countries were paying governments to buy African countries' quotas but this was leading to traditional fishermen then being outdone by industrial European fishing fleets with a capacity to catch much bigger quantities of fish.

In fact, Ms Muscat said Maltese fishermen could not be blamed for overfishing tuna, pointing out that the majority still used traditional methods. But Malta's tuna pens needed thousands of tonnes of tuna to be profitable, and while local fishermen contributed a few hundred tonnes, the bulk was coming from foreign fishermen using industrial fleets. The ban would not stop local fishermen from plying their trade but would serve to limit the intensive fishing methods the industry depended on.

She said tuna farms had grown into a multi-million euro industry, controlled by a handful of players. She highlighted that last year alone Malta exported over €36 million worth of bluefin tuna in 11 months - making it the country's third most exported commodity.

For the ban to enter into force, it would need to win support of two-thirds of around 175 countries attending the summit of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, taking place on March 13 to 15.

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Comments

Josette DeGabriele (1 day, 1 hour ago)

Malta's 'pot of Gold', should accurately be titled Japan's 'pot of yen'. The Maltese are doing all the hard, dirty work for the Japanese companies that are exporting over 85% of fattened tuna to Japan.

The Mediterranean Sea is fast becoming a barren waste. Fish supplies are negligent, and if the Maltese cared about their livelihood, they would be supporting sustainable fishing, for the long term future benefit of their country.

Maria Ellul (1 day, 3 hours ago)

Pot of gold for the few but major environmental and health hazard for the rest of us.

The Mediterranean countries in the EU would be better off collaborating for securing sustainable fishing and fish stocks rather than increasing GDP in the short term by unsustainable fishing and fish farming methods. Mr Pullicino and Dr de Marco should work side by side to ensure that what is good for the

goose is good for the gander. Pollution of our seas is harming us the Maltese and the tourism sector!!!!

R Muscat (1 day, 7 hours ago)

Instead of looking at the revenue that this industry produces, the Maltese should look at the harm that is done to our environment and our tourist industry.

Tuna are a major predator of jelly fish.

The tuna pens are unsightly and all too often the water around them has an oily film that smells badly.

Divers have complained of poor visibility near the pens.

etc etc all this to satisfy the gluttony of the Japanese, is it worth while? NO ,BAN industrial blue fin tuna NOW

Mark-Anthony Falzon (1 day, 7 hours ago)

Misleading title. The tuna penning business is hardly "Malta's" pot of gold. The sooner this ecological disaster is stopped, the sooner Malta's bathers can go back to enjoying the sea. Fingers crossed.