

FISHERIES: Regulators set bluefin catch limits far above those urged by science advisers (11/25/2008)

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UNITED NATIONS -- The regional fisheries management organization responsible for regulating the harvest of tuna species defied the advice of its own scientists yesterday and set catch limits for Atlantic bluefin tuna far above recommended levels.

The decision by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) is fueling calls for a global boycott on the consumption of bluefin, one of the world's most imperiled marine species.

At the conclusion of a weeklong meeting in Marrakech, Morocco, the commission voted to set the total catch limit for eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin at 22,000 metric tons for 2009. The move surprised observers who assumed the panel would heed growing evidence of an imminent collapse of the fishery and limit catches to 15,000 metric tons, the level recommended by the commission's scientific advisers.

ICCAT's voting members also ignored the advice of scientists who urge the closure of the Mediterranean bluefin fishery during the May and June spawning period. Another proposal by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) that called for a moratorium on eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin fishing was not even considered, observers said.

"There was some optimism that they would follow the science, and in the end they didn't," said Monica Allen with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

The 2008 quota for the eastern bluefin fishery was set at 29,000 metric tons, roughly double what commission scientists had called for. But the actual catch this year was much higher -- 61,000 metric tons, an indication of European nations' failure to get a handle on illegal and unreported fishing.

Members of the European Union once again apparently pushed for higher quota limits at the ICCAT meeting, despite earlier assumptions by environmentalists that Italy, Spain and others might favor smaller catch limits. Reports from Morocco suggest that European Commission members threatened smaller developing states with trade sanctions if they voted against higher quota targets.

"Instead of preserving the bluefin tuna stock from collapse, they gave in to the fishing industry's short-term economic interests," said Xavier Pastor, executive director of the advocacy group Oceana, in a statement issued in Morocco.

Bluefin tuna yields toro and maguro, the highest grade of sushi, and is also a key ingredient in other high-end cuisine. About 75 percent of all bluefin tuna is eaten in Japan, and more than half of the Atlantic and Mediterranean catch is exported to that country. But demand for the fish is

growing in Europe, the United States, and most recently in Russia and China as sushi's popularity grows.

The species is considered one of the world's top ocean predators. A full-grown adult can easily weigh up to 1,500 pounds, although those typically caught today are significantly smaller as commercial pressure leads to commercial fishers catching younger fish. Bluefin are considered a highly migratory species, as healthy adults have been known to cross the Atlantic in as little as 20 days.

Atlantic bluefin is managed as two separate populations -- the western Atlantic population, which spawns in the Gulf of Mexico, and the eastern group that spawns in the Mediterranean. Recent studies by the Tag-A-Giant Foundation have shown that both spawning groups feed in the same waters of the North Atlantic closer to Europe before returning to warmer waters to breed.

Experts with the World Wildlife Fund, Oceana, the IUCN and Greenpeace all warn that the European and Mediterranean fishery faces imminent collapse due to regulatory failures. Earlier this year, an independent U.N. adviser labeled ICCAT's management of the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean populations "an international disgrace."

Dramatic stock decline

Scientists estimate that bluefin tuna stocks have fallen by about 90 percent over the past three decades worldwide. Stocks in the western Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico have failed to recover to past levels, despite more than a decade of aggressive conservation efforts by U.S. and Canadian authorities. Scientists suspect that overfishing in European waters may be to blame for the failure of western Atlantic stocks to recover.

ICCAT voted yesterday to reduce the catch level for the western Atlantic stock, which is fished by U.S., Canadian, Mexican and Japanese vessels, from 2,100 to 1,800 metric tons by 2010, a move hailed by the U.S. delegation in Marrakech.

NOAA officials say that, despite the disappointing decision regarding the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stocks, ICCAT members did adopt new reporting requirements and improved monitoring mechanisms that should help "rationalize the fishery."

Nevertheless, environmental groups say the time has come to strip bluefin management from ICCAT.

Greenpeace and others are now calling for the species to be regulated under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the U.N. body most famous for its controls on the ivory trade.

Protections for marine species are increasingly taken up in CITES talks, but it was unclear whether the United States or others would propose adding bluefin tuna to CITES protection lists. The next CITES general meeting is scheduled for Doha, Qatar, in 2010.

Environmentalists are also calling on a global boycott on bluefin tuna consumption. Several high-end restaurants in Europe are reportedly following those calls and have removed bluefin from their menus.