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The plunder of bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean and East Atlantic in 2004 and 2005 – uncovering the real story

An independent study conducted by ATRT, S.L. for WWF

SUMMARY

When fisheries management completely fails

The Mediterranean and North-East Atlantic bluefin tuna¹ is on the verge of collapse. Traditional tuna trap fishermen in the Gibraltar Straits have in the last three years caught 80 per cent less fish compared to catches in the late 1990s – a clear sign that stocks are disappearing fast.

The fishery is running out of control, fuelled by the unrestricted expansion of tuna farms across the Mediterranean Sea and driven by the high prices paid by traders in Japan and elsewhere for this highly prized fish. Widespread violations of regional fisheries management rules mean a very significant share of all bluefin tuna harvested in Mediterranean waters qualifying as illegal, unregulated and unreported production – and most of this by the industrial purse seine vessels of EU fleets.

Based on five parallel studies referring to the 2004 and 2005 fishing seasons – including official customs data and monitoring of the traffic of tuna container ships out of the Mediterranean – this new WWF report reveals that bluefin tuna (BFT) catches are dramatically higher (more than 40 per cent) than the quota set by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT²).

The report – based on real documented proof rather than estimates – also shows that actual catch figures are deliberately under-reported at the official level, and that industrial fleets are now plundering the last remaining BFT breeding refuges in the Mediterranean off the coasts of Libya, Cyprus and Egypt. Fleets from the EU (especially France), Libya and Turkey are responsible for most of these illegal, unregulated and unreported catches (IUU).

From its findings WWF concludes that the fishery should be closed immediately, and that a strong recovery plan and strict management measures must be agreed this year – or we will most likely face the total commercial and biological extinction of the Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Key findings of WWF report

¹ Bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) is a species of tuna fish. As a pelagic species it migrates every year from Atlantic to Mediterranean waters – and back out again – during the course of the season.

² ICCAT (www.iccat.es) is the Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (RFMO) which regulates this particular bluefin tuna fishery. This year's plenary meeting (Croatia, 17-26 November 2006) will decide on key recovery and management measures for this fishery for the coming years.



The East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna stock has reached a critical level – purse seine fleets have ever increasing fishing capacity, fuelled by bloated EU subsidies and driven by the unrestricted development of tuna farms in the Mediterranean. Significant illegal fishing activity is clearly in evidence.

Concretely, the WWF report reveals:

1) Real catches are much higher than official ICCAT quotas

Even by conservative estimates, total actual catches of BFT in the Mediterranean are dramatically higher than the official 32,000-tonne annual quota set by ICCAT. The report shows that the quota was smashed in 2004 with a minimum catch of 44,948 tonnes, rising to at least 45,547 in 2005. This represents more than a 40 per cent over-quota fishing activity each year. Real catches however are likely to be well over 50,000 tonnes. ICCAT scientists have confirmed these figures.

The WWF report proves this through the following studies:

- Study 1: Analysis of international trade figures for BFT (export from producer countries and consumption statistics from main markets of Japan, US and EU)
- Study 2: 2004 BFT catches (official catch statistics supplemented with IUU estimates)
- Study 3: 2005 BFT catches (estimated catches by main BFT purse seine fleets)
- Study 4: BFT farming sector in the Mediterranean Sea
- Study 5: BFT reefer vessel activity in 2004/2005 (transporting BFT out of the Mediterranean)

2) Last Mediterranean breeding refuges are being plundered

Current catches of BFT rely on the last remaining spawning aggregations in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean, for example in Libyan waters. Bluefin tuna in the traditional fishing grounds of the Western Mediterranean have been almost entirely exhausted, so purse seine fleets are seeking previously unexploited waters to find the last remaining BFT.

3) Under-reporting is widespread

Real BFT catch figures are deliberately under-reported at the official level. There is a significant mismatch between official declarations – the WWF report compares national production and trade flow reports with national catch reports made to ICCAT, and in some cases there are major discrepancies. For example, in 2004 France reported production of over 9,450 tonnes (according to the EU Eurostat database and OFIMER-DPMA), whereas to ICCAT it declared catches of only 7,030 tonnes. This officially declared production of 9,450 tonnes shows an overfishing activity in France that year of over 50% when compared to the French quota.

4) Reefers transport unreported bluefin tuna catches straight out of the Mediterranean

Increasing amounts of unreported BFT catches are being shipped directly out of the Mediterranean on board massive reefer vessels and cold containers – largely destined to Japan or to intermediate transshipment ports like Las Palmas. According to industry sources and Lloyd's Marine Intelligence Unit, some 19 trips operated in 2004 to ship frozen BFT out of the Mediterranean – rising to 29 trips in 2005. For 2005 this equates to 47,965 tonnes (equivalent round weight at slaughter, assuming the reefers operated at maximum capacity) which, compared to the 32,000-tonne quota allowed by ICCAT, indicates that last year some 15,965 tonnes of BFT went unreported.



5) Main culprits are EU, Libyan and Turkish fleets

Most IUU catches can be traced to EU fleets (mainly French) and Libya – including ten former French purse seine vessels recently reflagged in Libya and still effectively under French control. Illegal tuna-spotting flights also took place in Libya's Fisheries Zone during the forbidden period of June, some of these operated from Malta and Lampedusa (Italy). Yet Libya has not reported any catch statistics to ICCAT for 2004 and 2005 at all. There is also evidence of a new joint venture between Korea, Malta and Libya – the so-called 'tuna hotel' – whereby 1,750 tonnes of BFT were transferred live to cages in 2005, then slaughtered and processed at sea.

6) Illegal fishing is a mockery of European taxpayers

Most EU purse seine BFT fishing fleets operating in the Mediterranean have been either modernised or completely rebuilt in the past ten years thanks to massive grants from EU public funds, creating huge overcapacity and thereby encouraging overfishing. Major tax fraud to national and European economic authorities is another likely result as significant bluefin tuna catches go unreported.

7) Significant under-reporting also by Turkey

Turkey has not been allocated a specific ICCAT fishing quota for BFT, and consequently significant unreported catches have resulted from this irregular situation. The report shows that in 2004 some 2,800 tonnes of unreported BFT catches were landed in Northern Cyprus.

WWF's study involves:

- Multiple assessment using independent data sources (five separate studies using different approaches and information)
- Analysis of international trade (cross-checking of national custom declaration databases and other international trade data)
- Accurate analysis of catches by major fleets and farm inputs using direct sources
- Detailed analysis of BFT taken out of the Mediterranean on board specialized reefers through individual vessel tracking (Lloyds Seasearcher tool)
- Use of most adequate conversion factors, aligned with ICCAT standards
- Strongly conservative approach (minimum values given).

WWF commissioned this report to independent Spanish-based bluefin tuna consulting company Advanced Tuna Ranching Technologies (ATRT SL ©[®]™).

WWF conclusions and recommendations



It is clear we are dangerously close to the total collapse of the Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery. The fishery should be closed immediately pending a reformed managerial framework – it may already be too late. At the next plenary meeting in November, ICCAT contracting parties are urgently recommended to agree a strict recovery plan and strong management measures for the coming years – to reduce fish mortality and maximise the chances for the currently overexploited population to rebuild to safe biological levels, compatible with a long-term sustainable exploitation.

Based on the evidence in the WWF report and recent advice from the ICCAT scientific committee, and after wide consultation with relevant international tuna experts, WWF recommends an immediate total closure of the fishery – pending a strict recovery plan and strong management measures, namely:

- **Extension of current seasonal closure** for industrial fishing of bluefin tuna. The seasonal closure is currently 15 July to 15 August; instead WWF recommends 1 May to 31 July. This is based on ICCAT scientific committee advice. Such a measure would protect the particularly vulnerable spawning BFT early in the season, and lead to an immediate real reduction of fishing effort.
- **Improved reporting system including observers** and real-time submission of information to a centralised ICCAT body by both purse seine vessels and farms. Observers reporting to ICCAT should be on board purse-seiners for the whole fishing season, as well as direct electronic reporting from captains of the vessels. Meanwhile there should be an observer on every farm throughout the farming season, reporting the amounts of BFT involved in all operations. This would include an immediate sanction scheme for violation of quotas.
- **Limitation of tuna farming capacity** through the allocation of a total farming quota on a country basis – according to current farming capacity and production, and to correlate with total allowable catch (TAC) of the whole Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic stock. Currently the total capacity of Mediterranean tuna farms is well over the TAC, which clearly encourages vast overfishing. The limitation of farming capacity will also secure the short-term profitability of the tuna sector itself – taking into account the needs of other tuna harvesters, such as traditional tuna traps.
- **Setting a rational, biologically-based minimum landing size** in the Mediterranean so that BFT are allowed time to mature and reproduce – WWF recommends an increase to 30kg to match sexual maturity of the species, rather than the current 10kg minimum.

If ICCAT fails to impose both a strict recovery plan and sustainable management measures for bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean and East Atlantic, WWF will mobilise traders and consumers in the major markets of Japan and the US to stop buying bluefin tuna from this fishery.