Atlantic Bluefin Tuna and CITES

Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) has been driven to the edge of collapse by overfishing and the demand for international trade.

This top predator has been traditionally harvested in the Eastern Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea through traditional fishing activity like tuna traps, but in recent decades an industrial fishing industry with high tech purse seine gear has been widely developed, fuelled by government subsidies.

The activity of this huge fleet has focused on the main spawning areas in the Mediterranean Sea, where bluefin tuna aggregate to spawn in the spring-summer season.¹ The development of this fleet has been accompanied by the development of fattening farms all along the Mediterranean coast, allowing the industry to control both the market and the fisheries. Additionally, the whole industrial activity has been characterised by high percentages of catch misreporting and illegal fishing, leading to higher levels of overfishing.

In the western Atlantic Ocean, overfishing led to the adoption of a rebuilding plan in 1999, but this plan has proved unable to recover the stock, with actual catches below the agreed quotas.² This depleted stock has not shown the needed signs of rebuilding since the plan was adopted.

Despite all the clear alarms, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the organisation that brings together all of the countries responsible for managing this tuna fishery, has repeatedly ignored scientific advice and has failed in controlling and monitoring this fishery.

The ICCAT Standing Committee of Research and Statistics (SCRS) has estimated that North Atlantic bluefin tuna spawning biomass has been decimated to less than 15 percent of its unfished biomass, with the sharpest decline occurring in the last decade.³ Bluefin tuna meets the criterion C “marked decline” for inclusion in CITES Appendix I as a species endangered with extinction.⁴

In the last few years, nearly all of the declared bluefin tuna caught in the Mediterranean has been exported overseas.² The international marine conservation organization Oceana believes that an international trade ban now is the only option left to prevent the disappearance of endangered bluefin tuna. Oceana urges the contracting parties to support Monaco’s proposal to include this species in CITES Appendix I.
Facts About Atlantic Bluefin Tuna

- Bluefin tuna can reach three meters in length and weigh up to 400 kg.\(^3\)
- Most Mediterranean bluefin tuna are caught in international waters by an international fleet.
- In 2007, scientists recommended a 15,000 tones total catch for the Eastern stock. Actual catches were estimated at 61,000 tones.\(^2\)
- Japan is the main market for Atlantic bluefin tuna, where a single specimen can be auctioned for more than $50,000.

Wide Consensus on the Suitability of CITES to Address Stock Decline

There is now wide consensus about the need for an international bluefin tuna trade ban as a result of evidence of the wide extent of the North Atlantic’s population decline and the imminent threat of stock collapse. This fact is reflected by the Principality of Monaco’s proposal for including this species in CITES Appendix I.\(^6\)

This proposal has already been supported by the Ad Hoc Panel of experts of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO),\(^7\) the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)\(^8\) and the CITES Secretariat\(^9\), which released assessments supporting the Appendix I listing of Atlantic bluefin tuna based on the available scientific evidence.

Oceana believes that immediate and drastic action is needed to preserve Atlantic bluefin tuna. This can be achieved through the inclusion of bluefin tuna in CITES Appendix I, but without implementation delays or exemptions that would weaken the measure and promote the illegal trade of this species worldwide. Now is the time to decide on a future for the bluefin tuna in our oceans.
What is CITES?

The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) is an international agreement entered into force in 1975 to prevent species from becoming extinct as a result of international trade. Regulated through export and import permits, CITES applies to species whose populations may be threatened by international trade. There are approximately 5,000 species of animals and 28,000 species of plants included in the CITES three appendices. Proposals to include species in Appendices I and II are considered by the 175 CITES countries at a Conference of the Parties every two to three years. Within the last 30 years, no species that has been included in CITES has gone extinct, thus illustrating its ability to be successful.10

Appendix I is the most stringent inclusion, banning commercial international trade for species who are most threatened with extinction.

Appendix II is for species that may become threatened with extinction if trade of the species is not strictly regulated. In addition, species that look similar in appearance to other species included in Appendix II may also be included. International commercial trade of included species requires an export permit.

Appendix III includes species that an individual Party has asked other parties to assist in the regulation of trade. Trade of the included species requires an export permit and a certificate of origin.
References

8 UICN/TRAFFIC Analyses of the Proposals for CITES CoP 15.

About Oceana

Oceana campaigns to protect and restore the world’s oceans. Our teams of marine scientists, economists, lawyers and advocates win specific and concrete policy changes to reduce pollution and to prevent the irreversible collapse of fish populations, marine mammals and other sea life. Global in scope and dedicated to conservation, Oceana has campaigners based in North America, Europe and South and Central America. More than 300,000 members and e-activists in over 150 countries have already joined Oceana. For more information, please visit http://www.oceana.org.