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## Fishing nations criticised over deal on bluefin tuna



Conservationists have been demanding more substantial reductions in fishing quotas

Fishing nations have agreed a small cut in Atlantic bluefin tuna quotas, after meeting in Paris.

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) set the 2011 quota at 12,900 tonnes, down from 13,500 tonnes.

Conservationists say the bluefin tuna is threatened by overfishing, and much deeper cuts are needed.

They have criticised ICCAT in the past for failing to ensure that the species and others are fished sustainably.

Correspondents say the 48 countries represented at the talks were divided over what action to take, with some calling for a lower quota or even a temporary suspension of bluefin fishing to allow stocks to recover.

But industry representatives and the governments that back them said the limits agreed at the meeting were sufficient.

"The actual catch level will be around 11,000, which is a large reduction from current levels," the head of the Japanese delegation, Masanori Miyahara, said, adding that some members had promised not to use up their quotas.

The decision was criticised by Sue Lieberman, policy director of the US-based Pew Environment Group.

"Despite sound science to show how threatened these species are... Atlantic bluefin tuna once again were denied the protection they desperately need," she said.

"ICCAT member governments had more than enough information to act decisively. They failed to do so."

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News

## Bluefin tuna regulators under pressure

Investigation into fishing industry reveals a decade of violations.

Anjali Nayar



Atlantic bluefin tuna populations are threatened by overfishing. Francisco Bonilla/REUTERS  
As fisheries regulators meet next week to weigh the fate of Atlantic bluefin tuna, they are coming under mounting pressure to suspend the entire bluefin industry until allegations of mismanagement can be resolved.

The Madrid-based International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the body responsible for managing tuna fishing, [gathers in Paris](#) on 17 November to assess the state of bluefin tuna fisheries and set future catch quotas.

But the meeting will be overshadowed by a report, released this week, which documents a decade of illegal fishing of eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks, leading to the fishery's near-collapse and a black market worth around US\$4 billion.

A single Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) can weigh more than 500 kilograms and sell for more than \$100,000 in Japanese markets. But the profitable market for the species has left it depleted to roughly 35% of its historic levels, according to ICCAT.

The new report — [Looting the Seas](#) — is the culmination of an eight-month investigation by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), a group formed by the non-profit Center for Public Integrity in Washington DC.

"Those of us who have worked on bluefin tuna aren't surprised," says Sue Liebermann, Director of International Policy at the Pew Environment Group in Washington DC, a non-profit conservation advocacy group. "All the information on the fraud, the illegal trade, and the doctoring of paperwork is now fully documented," she adds. "Governments can no longer hide saying there isn't proof that this has happened."

## Caught out

The ICIJ report claims that from 1998 to 2007, more than one third of all eastern Atlantic bluefin caught were taken illegally. The alleged offences include catching undersized fish, under-reporting catch sizes and violating quotas set by ICCAT.

ICCAT is often criticized for making its quotas too lenient, as well as failing to enforce them (see ['Bad news for tuna is bad news for CITES'](#)). The ICCAT's scientific committee says it is aware of severe misreporting from 1998 to 2007, which it highlighted in its most recent scientific report.

During that period, ICCAT estimates the annual catch of bluefin was between 50,000 and 60,000 tonnes, about 40% higher than the reported catch of 30,000–35,000 tonnes, says Jean-Marc Fromentin, an ecologist from the Mediterranean and Tropical Fisheries Research Centre in Sète, France, and a member of the ICCAT scientific committee. During this period, ICCAT's scientific committee recommended that catch not exceed 15,000 to 25,000 tonnes, he adds.

"During that period, it was really bad," says Fromentin. "There was a great deal of overfishing and under-reporting of catch everywhere, but especially in the Mediterranean."

But Fromentin maintains the situation has improved in the last three years because of new enforcement measures. Observers have been posted onto fishing boats and at fish farms, where tuna are fattened before being harvested. Before they are sold, all fish must now have the right paperwork: a bluefin catch document (BCD), which tracks the fish up the supply chain.

The new report alleges that many fish end up in the market without complete paperwork, but Fromentin says the system has drastically reduced under-reporting of catches.

That does not mean an end to over-fishing though, says Andrew Rosenberg, senior vice president for science and knowledge at Conservation International, an advocacy group based in Arlington, Virginia, and a former fisheries negotiator for the United States. "They've reduced the under-reporting, but you can't really get rid of the black-market fish," he says. The black market includes fish caught by nations that are not members of ICCAT, as well as fish caught by vessels registered under 'flags of convenience', bringing them under the jurisdiction of countries that are not ICCAT members.

Although environmental advocates such as the Pew Environment Group will be pushing ICCAT nations to suspend bluefin fishing at next week's meeting, it is more likely that the talks will see countries re-affirm existing quotas. However, they may also pledge their support for tougher documentation. That in itself, says Rosenberg, would be an achievement.

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## Bluefin tuna protection system 'full of holes'



Clip from Life on the Edge: Looting The Seas

An international system of tracking tuna - a vital tool in the preservation of stocks - has been found to be full of gaps, reports Steve Bradshaw.

In Japan, diners are being urged to curb their craze for one of their favourite kinds of sushi - unless Mediterranean suppliers can prove it is legally and sustainably caught.

Masanori Miyahara, chief counselor of the Fisheries Agency of Japan, said consumers may have to "just forget about tuna for the time being."

Favoured for its soft red flesh, bluefin tuna is prized by sushi lovers around the world, but Japan consumes about 80% of the global supply.

"You have a wide variety of nice fish around Japan at very reasonable prices," he says.



Japan consumes about 80% of the global supply of bluefin tuna  
Mr Miyahara's comments come ahead of a conference in Paris on 17 November, which could

decide the fate of the endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Spawning stocks of Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna - the kind caught in the Mediterranean - are widely estimated to be down by around 75% in the last four decades, and some scientists believe they might be on the verge of collapse.

Mr Miyahara's culinary intervention is a result of continued Japanese concern that too many European suppliers of the huge, sleek fish cannot prove they are following the rules.

The Washington-based International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) - which has spent months analysing the trade - calculates that more than one in three bluefins caught in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean between 1998 and 2007 was fished illegally.

The illegal catches gave rise to an off-the-books trade in bluefin tuna, conservatively valued at \$4 billion, according to ICIJ.

'Missing'

In Japan, Mr Miyahara is particularly concerned about the Bluefin Tuna Catch Document (BCD), a paper-based system of tracking tuna introduced in 2008.

The BCD is collated by the Madrid-based secretariat of ICCAT, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

It is meant to be a vital tool in the preservation of stocks, attaching a number to each catch or net-load so it can be followed from vessel to market.

## **ICCAT tracking requirements**

- Catch data
- Exporter or seller details
- Transshipment info (vessel name, port details)
- Farm details
- Harvest information
- Trade information, such as point and destination of export

In theory the BCD also enables ranches and exporting countries to prove their catch is legal - and within the quotas set by ICCAT's governing commission of tuna-trading member states.

But Mr Miyahara has described some BCD entries as "weird", and Japan has refused to accept thousands of tonnes of Atlantic bluefin, alleging suppliers cannot demonstrate it is legally caught because the paperwork is not in order.

The BCD database is secret and password-protected, but ICIJ reporters were given access by a host country.



Dr Fromentin says there was no political will to enforce the fishing quota  
"You can use this for really good things, but there are so many holes in this data that it's not much better than a pile of papers," said the ICIJ's Kate Willson.

"You're looking at about 80% of all of the purse seine catches missing something: it doesn't have a country, it doesn't have any kind of import information - some information that would let me know if this fish was legal."

Most tuna is now caught at sea by purse seine fishermen, and then taken live into ranches where it is fattened.

'Stabilised'

In some cases, the ICIJ found entries where more tuna were apparently leaving ranches rather than entering them - a discrepancy that cannot be explained by breeding.

"It's not perfect yet. We still need to improve the system"

Driss Meski ICCAT

The big Western European fishing nations - Italy, France, Spain - have started to clean up their act after years of often illegal overfishing.

"You have to realise that within the bluefin tuna, all the countries were lying," says Dr Jean-Marc Fromentin of ICCAT's own scientific committee.

"There was just no political will to enforce the rules, most notably the quota," he added.

Asked about the ICIJ findings, ICCAT's Executive Secretary Driss Meski said: "We are explaining to contracting parties the difficulties we are facing using these [BCD] documents. And we are having difficulties."

"It's not perfect yet. We still need to improve the system," he said.

Mr Meski insists there is still ground for optimism. He will tell the Paris conference that, according to ICCAT scientists, there is a 60% chance that bluefin tuna stocks can be stabilised at an annual catch between 13,500 tonnes and zero.

"The situation is not as bad as we thought and there are some possibilities," he said. "If we adopt several management measures with precaution, we can have a better management situation and the stock could be rebuilt."

'Bloody mess'

The Japanese, for their part, are going out of their way to show that they care about the sustainability of the fishery, particularly after Japan led an effort earlier this year to defeat a

proposal to ban the Atlantic bluefin trade by the UN-backed Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites).



Japan consumes about 80% of the global supply of bluefin tuna  
But new fleets - in less-regulated places from Turkey to Libya - are ramping up their operations.

And according to EU Fisheries Commissioner Maria Damanaki, that could pose fresh difficulties.

"We have problems with our member states, but also with our neighbours," says Ms Damanaki.

"I am coming from a Mediterranean state - so I can say it: in the Mediterranean, compliance is not our strong point."

Ms Damanaki insists she will do all she can to make bluefin stocks sustainable.

But with the BCD system "a bloody mess", according to Dr Fromentin, there is still no guarantee that the years in which bluefin stocks were secretly looted are over.