

27 March 2010

# How bureaucrats decided not to save the bluefin tuna

By Adam Mynott  
BBC News, Doha

**The latest two-week long meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) saw bureaucrats sweep aside expert advice on how to save the bluefin tuna.**



Tanzania lost its bid to sell off a stockpile of elephant ivory

There is no disputing they are important - vital decisions have been taken here in Doha in the past few days affecting plants and creatures great and small.

But international conferences as journalistic assignments struggle to quicken the pulse or stimulate the mind.

They are monuments to bureaucracy and they present a televised world stage to middle-ranking bureaucrats who, once they have pressed the button on the desk in front of them illuminating a red light indicating their microphone is on, seem very reluctant to switch it off again.

Middle-ranking bureaucrats are incapable of generating anything other than middle-ranking oratory.

There are moments of excitement, if that is not too strong a word.

When the vote came through not to allow Tanzania to sell a stockpile of elephant ivory there was applause in the hall: a victory for conservation.

There were equivalent levels of excitement and outrage when delegates voted not to protect the bluefin tuna and several species of shark which are being fished steadily to extinction.

**Degree of suspicion**

CITES delegates come together every two or three years to add and amend legal protection for a multiplicity of species.



Delegates vote electronically on some of the more contentious issues

Their decisions sit on top of years of detailed, dedicated research.

It is the high-profile, emblematic animals that get most of the attention - the tigers, elephants and gorillas - and crucial measures to protect other species like cacti, caterpillars and clams pass through often unnoticed.

Most issues are agreed by consensus but some contentious ones are pushed to a vote.

Balloting now takes place electronically. Member countries have voting buttons on their desks, and because the counting is electronic and less transparent than a show of hands, it is viewed with a degree of suspicion.

To build confidence, the chairman periodically carries out a few dummy runs to satisfy everyone there are no gremlins in the software.

On day nine as crucial votes loomed, delegates were invited to check the electronic balloting device once again.

"This is just to test the system," the chairman said.

"Here's a simple question to make sure the buttons are working properly: Is Doha the capital of Qatar? To record Yes, please press button number two."

**“ This identified, I think, a level of cynicism and mistrust that is new to the convention ”**

Thirty seconds later, once the 150 delegates had reached forward to prod the relevant button and the votes were recorded, two nations, Croatia and Cameroon, had voted No and - perhaps from force of habit long-established in security councils and global gatherings - China abstained.

The Cameroon and Croatian delegations could not or maybe did not want to explain why they appeared to have learnt little about the city in which they had spent the past week.

The Chinese delegation remained inscrutable and said nothing.

Perhaps they thought it might be giving too much away if they stated unequivocally that Doha was the capital of Qatar.

What this identified, I think, is a level of cynicism and mistrust that is new to the convention.

### **Shock decision?**

CITES - the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora - exists to save the planet's endangered species.

An international treaty mechanism which enables man to come together and stop the destructive exploitation of other creatures and plants.



Most of the world's bluefin tuna catch is consumed in Japanese restaurants

No decision is taken without the support of expert evidence, and I cannot help but feel huge sympathy for the scientists and naturalists who tramp through dense jungle and wade through swamps to collect data.

They compile, assess and deliver a recommendation about the protection of a species that they understand in greater detail than anyone else on the planet; all too often that expertise is swept aside by baser instincts.

Maybe it is naive to be surprised that that CITES' lofty ideals have become sullied and tarnished by geo-politics, but it is impossible to apply anything other than a very cynical interpretation to the bluefin tuna vote.

Years of research by marine and fisheries experts have concluded that the bluefin tuna's days are numbered, and unless there is an immediate ban it will become extinct in the very near future.

Some experts fear its population in the Atlantic has already fallen below sustainable levels.

Delegates were being asked to give the fish the very highest level of protection and ban its sale.

Leading opposition to the ban was Japan, where most of the world catch is consumed in sushi restaurants.

The Japanese had applied months of diplomatic and not-so-diplomatic activity to their preparations for CITES and they took a 30-strong delegation teeming with fisheries experts to the Doha gathering.

Japan argued that a ban would be unfair, but the science supporting reasoned analysis was pushed to one side by politics, amid claims that Japan was trading promises of donor aid to developing countries in exchange for votes.

Japan prevailed and the bluefin tuna may be doomed.

18 March 2010

## Bluefin tuna ban proposal meets rejection

By Richard Black

Environment correspondent, BBC News website



Large modern tuna boats have revolutionised the industry

**A proposal to ban international trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna, which is a sushi mainstay in Japan, has been rejected by a UN wildlife meeting.**

Thursday's decision occurred after Japan, Canada and many poor nations opposed the

measure on the grounds it would devastate fishing economies.

Monaco tabled the plan at the meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES).

Stocks have fallen by about 85% since the industrial fishing era began.

Monaco argued that the organisation responsible for managing the bluefin fishery - the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (Iccat) - had not implemented measures strict enough to ensure the species' survival.

Scientists and campaigners working with conservation organisations were disappointed with the outcome.

**“ The market for this fish is just too lucrative... for enough governments to support a truly sustainable future for the fish ”**

Dr Sue Lieberman  
Pew Environment Group

"We think it is quite a blow, because Iccat has not been able to demonstrate that it is able to implement procedures that will lead to [the bluefin's] recovery," said Glenn Sant, leader of the global marine programme with Traffic, the international wildlife trade monitoring network.

"There was really no question that it met the [scientific] criteria for listing," he told BBC News from the conference in Doha, Qatar.

"Listing" is the technical term for imposing restriction on international trade through CITES. Bluefin tuna was slated for listing on Appendix One - a complete ban.

Mr Sant was a member of the expert panel convened last year by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization to examine whether the Atlantic bluefin's plight was severe enough to meet Appendix One criteria.

A majority of the panel believed it did, though consensus was not achieved. Earlier, Iccat's scientific advisers had concluded a trade ban was justified.

### **UK defiance**

A spokeswoman for the US delegation at CITES - which supported and lobbied for the ban - also described the vote as "disappointing".

"We can only hope that countries that are here that are Iccat members now fulfil their promises [to manage the stock properly]", she said.

### **CITES EXPLAINED**

Threatened organisms listed on three  
appendices depending on level of risk  
Appendix 1 - all international trade banned

Appendix 2 - international trade monitored and regulated

Appendix 3 - trade bans by individual governments, others asked to assist

"Uplisting" - moving organism to a more protective appendix; "downlisting" - the reverse

Conferences of the Parties (COPs) held every three years

CITES administered by UN Environment Programme (Unep)

Japan - the principal bluefin-consuming nation - had made its opposition to the proposal clear before the CITES meeting started.

It argues that commercial fisheries should be managed through bodies such as Iccat.

The debate - described by one observer as "passionate" - saw two votes.

The first, on an EU amendment that weakened the original Monaco proposal but still endorsed the ban, was defeated by 72 votes to 43 in a secret ballot.

(The EU is supposed to vote as a bloc in these negotiations. Nations with active tuna fleets such as France, Italy and Spain had been unwilling to support an outright, immediate ban.)

The vote on the original motion then went down by 68 votes to 20.

In theory, EU nations had to abstain on the second vote as not all delegates had authority from their governments to vote for it.

However, some - including the UK - did support the motion, BBC News has learned - a move that potentially risks sanctions from the European Commission.

### **Bear facts**

Sue Lieberman, director of international policy with the Pew Environment Group, suggested lobbying from the fishing industry was ultimately responsible for the defeat.

"This meeting presented a golden opportunity for governments to take a stand against overfishing, and too many governments failed to do so," she said.

"The market for this fish is just too lucrative, and the pressure from fishing interests too great, for enough governments to support a truly sustainable future for the fish."

CITES votes can be reviewed on the meeting's final day, but the substantial margin of defeat suggests this one will not be.

Earlier in the day, a US-sponsored motion seeking to ban international trade in products made from polar bears was also defeated.

Opponents argued that the species' main threat was not trade, but climate change.

Some conservation groups - including Traffic - did not support the proposal, therefore.

There were also concerns that banning the trade might hurt indigenous peoples around the Arctic who sometimes hunt the bears for meat.

*Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk*

13 March 2010

## **Ivory and bluefin tuna top agenda at UN wildlife summit**

By Richard Black  
Environment correspondent, BBC News



A further two African nations are bidding for ivory sales

**Sales of ivory and a possible ban on trading bluefin tuna top the agenda for the two-week CITES meeting that opens this weekend in Doha, Qatar.**

CITES - the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species - will set a precedent if it votes to ban trading in a lucrative fish such as bluefin.

The US and EU back the proposal, but Japan is set against.

Conservation groups are also hoping for increased protection on sharks, coral, polar bears, lizards and amphibians.

### **African disunity**

The ivory and tuna issues are both potentially controversial.

“ **This is a key conservation moment - whether the governments here will vote for the conservation of bluefin tuna**

”

Dr Sue Lieberman  
Pew Environment Group

International ivory trading was banned in 1989.

But countries considered to have well-managed stocks of elephants and reliable systems for tracking tusks have three times been allowed to sell consignments from government stockpiles.

Zambia and Tanzania are now seeking permission for a further sale.

But other African nations led by Kenya and Mali want a 20-year ban on all ivory exports. They argue that the legal trade stimulates poaching, which has been on the rise in recent years.

"To permit any step towards further trade in ivory makes no sense whatsoever - it flies in the face of every basic conservation principle and is contrary to the agreement made at the last meeting," said Jason Bell-Leask from the International Fund for Animal Welfare (Ifaw).

However, the organisation Traffic - which is charged with collecting data on illegal elephant killings and ivory smuggling - maintains there is no proof of a link.



The endangered Luristan newt

 [Enlarge](#)

[Enlarge Image](#)

Data from its Elephant Trade Information System (Etis) shows that the rate of seizures of illegal ivory began rising well in 2004, well before the last one-off legal ivory sale was authorised in 2007.

And the previous one-off sale, in 1999, co-incided with a fall in seizures.

Etis manager Tom Milliken argues that African governments wanting to stem the rising ivory tide would be better advised to step up enforcement efforts against poachers and traders.

And China, the principal market for illegal ivory, should live up to its promises to act against smuggling gangs, he says.

Otherwise, he says: "Arguments over the impacts of one-off sales will continue to divert

attention away from the real problem: finding ways to stop the flow of illicit ivory at source."

### **Tuna battles**

The chances of CITES voting to ban the international trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna increased markedly during the week when - after months of wrangling - the EU decided to give its support.

The bloc includes several nations with tuna fleets in the Mediterranean, the main fishing ground.

#### **CITES EXPLAINED**

Threatened organisms listed on three appendices depending on level of risk  
Appendix 1 - all international trade banned  
Appendix 2 - international trade monitored and regulated

Appendix 3 - trade bans by individual governments, others asked to assist

"Uplisting" - moving organism to a more protective appendix; "downlisting" - the reverse

Conferences of the Parties (COPs) held every three years

CITES administered by UN Environment Programme (Unep)

Conservation groups argue that the ban is needed because governments involved in the industry have allowed overfishing to such an extent that the species' survival is in some doubt.

They also argue that a pause in fishing will eventually lead to higher catches.

"The goal is not to ban trade indefinitely, but to suspend international trade until the species recovers sufficiently to enable international trade to resume," said Sue Lieberman, director of international policy with the Pew Environment Group.

"This is a key conservation moment - whether the governments here will vote for the conservation of bluefin tuna, or will allow commercial fishery interests to prevail, further causing over-fishing and continued decline of this iconic species," she told BBC News from Doha.

Japan has indicated that it would opt out of a trade ban, as it is entitled to do under CITES rules.

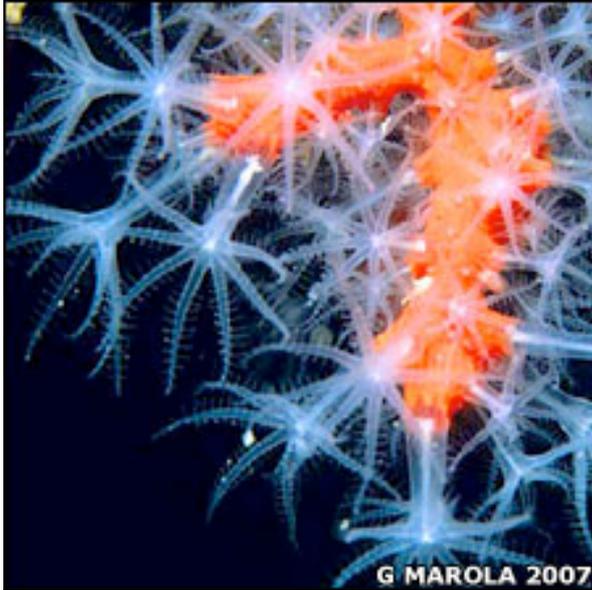
But if all other tuna fishing countries went along with it, there would be no supply of tuna to import.

Conservation groups are urging the EU and US to make sure that other tuna fishing countries, particularly North African states bordering the Mediterranean, do not opt out.

### **Skin and teeth**

The CITES meeting will also consider a US proposal to ban international trade in items originating from polar bears.

Rapid melting of Arctic sea ice in recent decades has placed the polar bear on the Red List of Threatened Species.



The delicate red and pink corals are highly prized by jewellers

About 2,000 items are traded internationally each year, including skin, skulls, teeth and claws.

Although this is not considered to be the major threat to the species' survival, the US feels that the trade ban would be a help, and would not intrude on the rights of Arctic indigenous peoples with a history of hunting polar bears for meat and skin.

Other proposals would see trade banned in a number of reptiles and amphibians, including three iguanas from Mexico and the critically endangered Luristan newt of Iran.

Four species of shark are also up for consideration, as are the red and pink *Corallium* corals from the Mediterranean that are used in the jewellery trade.

[Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk](mailto:Richard.Black-INTERNET@bbc.co.uk)