

A great ocean predator's decline

Atlantic bluefin tuna has been caught in huge numbers to feed the demand for high-end sushi and sashimi in Japan. By David Fleshler.

They streak through the Florida Straits at up to 50 mph, Harley-Davidson-size fish on their way from spawning in the Gulf of Mexico to the rich feeding grounds off the northeastern United States and Canada.

Atlantic bluefin tuna once drew Ernest Hemingway, Zane Grey and thousands of other anglers to Florida and the Bahamas for white-knuckled fights with one of the strongest fish in the ocean.

But few people see tuna off South Florida today. The fish have undergone a sharp decline to feed a ravenous demand for sushi and sashimi in Japan, where a single high-quality tuna can fetch more than \$150,000 at auction. The BP oil spill took place where the tunas congregate to spawn, with unknown impact on their reproduction. Now the National Marine Fisheries Service has announced it will consider whether to put the tuna on the endangered species list, a melancholy fate for a once-abundant predator respected for its strength and fighting ability.

"They're exciting, extremely strong, probably the strong fish in the ocean," said Allen Merritt, 88, a retired Pompano Beach fishing guide who used to catch them off Bimini. "Some fish rival them for weight, like the black marlin. But that fight is nothing compared to a tuna."

Forget the hockey-puck-size cans stacked up at the grocery store that contain the flesh of cheaper tunas. Unless you've been to a gourmet sushi restaurant, the odds are you've never seen a piece of Atlantic bluefin tuna. At Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market, top restaurants bid against each other to be able to offer diners the delicacy, prized for its high fat content.

With huge sums at stake, fishing fleets have gone after the tuna with all the tools of high-technology, industrialized fishing, including spotter planes, long-lines, purse-seine nets and harpoons, dragging tunas from the ocean at a far higher rate than the species could replace.

From 1970 to 2007 the western Atlantic tuna population's spawning stock declined by 82 percent, according to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. From 1955 to 2007, the eastern stock de-

clined by 72 percent. About three-quarters of the world catch goes to Japan.

"The decline is indisputably because of overfishing," said Catherine Killduff, staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity, which filed the petition to put the tuna on the endangered species list. "These fish have been fished for millennia, but the last 40 years have been particularly hard on them. There hasn't been much progress in rebuilding these stocks."

Like whales, elephants and Canadian seals, the Atlantic bluefin tuna has emerged as an international wildlife cause. The environmental groups Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd have mounted "Whale Wars"-style actions against European tuna boats in the Mediterranean.

Russell Nelson, a fishery consultant for the Billfish Foundation and Coastal Conservation Association, said the Japanese and European Union have fought proposals from the United States and other countries to limit the catch.

In March, Japan led the fight to defeat a proposal to protect the tuna under the United Nations Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species, which would have banned international trade.

"The Japanese were all over it," Nelson said. "It didn't go anywhere."

Japan said it opposed the ban because the tuna did not meet the standard to be considered an endangered species and should be managed through traditional fishery methods.

The tuna is managed by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, an organization accused by critics of catering to the fishing industry, allowing excessive quotas that have hastened the species' decline.

Nelson said the main opposition now to catch limits comes not from Japan but from countries around the Mediterranean, where the eastern tuna population spawns. "The bad guys now are the Europeans, largely pushed by commercial tuna fishing in Spain, Italy and southern France," he said.

The proposal to list the tuna as an endangered species in the United States, which would ban fishing, exports and

imports, drew immediate criticism from fishing groups and their supporters in Congress.

"This decision comes at the worst possible time for Massachusetts fishermen," Sen. John Kerry, D-Mass., said in a news release. "... The problem is simple: for years, European Union countries have taken significantly more than their fair share, which puts an undue burden on New England's fishermen. A listing won't change that one bit, it'll just handcuff our fishermen."

Jim Donofrio, executive director of the Recreational Fishing Alliance, said an endangered species designation would shut down a recreational fishery from North Carolina to New England, hurting charter boats and businesses that sell tackle and other supplies.

""The European Union has overfished their quotas for years, even subsidizing the expansion of their national bluefin tuna fleets," Donofrio said in a statement. "The EU keeps overfishing the stock, the Japanese keep buying up the illegal harvest, and here in the United States a well-financed environmental movement is punishing our American anglers."

But Killduff said it would protect tunas here and strengthen the hand of the United States in pressing for tighter international catch restrictions.

"I can't guarantee what the other countries will do, but setting an example will help," she said. "I don't think it's an excuse for us to say they're not doing anything so we won't do anything either."