



# Nations Face Off Warily on Bluefin Tuna

By DAVID JOLLY



INTERNATIONAL FISHERIES CONFERENCES don't necessarily make for high drama. But a meeting that opens on Wednesday on the fate of the Atlantic bluefin tuna could leave some officials, including those of the host country, squirming in the spotlight.

Officials will gather for 10 days in Paris under the auspices of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, a regional fisheries management organization made up of 48 member governments. The commission has the task of apportioning the catch so as to give this prized sushi fish a chance to bounce back from overfishing.

Iccat's own scientists warn that the bluefin is in danger of extinction, with the stock in serious decline on both sides of the Atlantic. They acknowledge that the commission has been ineffective in controlling overfishing: despite the "conservation" in its name, the commission usually has its efforts devolve into something resembling backroom deals to divide a shrinking pie.

For conservationists, fed up with the commission's inability to arrest the bluefin's catastrophic decline and stop widespread cheating by member nations, that means the organization should set the quota at zero. And they want spawning-ground sanctuaries in both the Mediterranean and the Gulf of Mexico.

The oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico has heightened the need for action, they argue. (Scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration scientists say the effects of the spill on the bluefin will only become clear over the next year as data become available).

Sergi Tudela, head of fisheries at the environmental group WWF Mediterranean, called Iccat "the laughingstock on the world stage of fisheries management."

He pointed to a recent report by the

International Consortium of Investigative Journalists that described "a kind of Wild West of fishing" in which fishermen, traders and regulators all ignored the rules governing the enormously valuable fish.

The conservationists are particularly unhappy that catch limits have been set for years without firm estimates of how many fish are being taken.

The "total allowable catch" for 2010 was 13,500 tons, a level that Iccat scientists say is sufficient to ensure rebuilding the bluefin stock by 2023 with at least a 60 percent probability of success — or, as the environmentalist camp would have it, with a 40 percent chance of failure.

The European Union's fisheries commissioner, Maria Damanaki, with backing from Sweden, Germany and Britain, has called for an Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean quota of "less than 6,000 tons." The union's 27 members are supposed to reach a consensus and vote as a bloc.

However, the main European bluefin fishing states — France, Italy and Spain — argue that the science justifies keeping the quota at 13,500 tons. That despite the fact that just eight months ago, the three countries,



Reuters Greenpeace activists chained themselves to a car adorned by a bluefin tuna model at the French Agriculture Ministry in Paris. France has been accused of conniving to help fishermen.

along with the rest of the European Union backed a proposal to halt all trade in bluefin at a meeting of the United Nations Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species.

The large-scale industrial fishing boats that can Hoover up entire schools of fish are behind much of the recent decline in the stock, and those fleets wield political clout seemingly out of proportion to their numbers. France has just 17 of the boats, yet the government has at times appeared desperate to keep the fishery open, perhaps in part because antagonizing them can lead to port blockades by striking fishermen.

In addition to the apparent about-face by President Nicolas Sarkozy's government, the hosts may find the situation delicate for another reason: the French Agriculture Ministry was singled out in the journalists' report as having allegedly connived for many years to help French fishermen understate their catch.

Responding to a French legislator's query on the report, the current agriculture minister, Bruno Le Maire, responded in a fashion that seemed to question the writer's patriotism: "I beg you, stop casting aspersions on French fishermen!" He acknowledged that there had been problems but said they had been solved.

Others sharply disagree. "France is becoming the Darth Vader of the bluefin fishery," Rémi Parmentier, an adviser to the Pew Environment Group, said in a recent interview. "France appears to be doing its best to sink proposals to reduce the catch."

European Union ministers hope to come to a common position on Wednesday in Brussels.

As for the United States, the administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Jane Lubchenco, told me a few months ago that Washington

would support the scientific recommendations, whatever they were.

Still, the American delegation has its own domestic considerations. In September, the entire congressional delegation of Massachusetts, a key bluefin fishing state, called on NOAA to reject a proposal by the Center for Biological Diversity to have the bluefin treated under American law as an endangered species like the bald eagle.

The letter — from both Massachusetts senators as well as Representatives Barney Frank, John Tierney and William Delahunt — depicts the bluefin question as a purely economic issue, quoting Senator Scott Brown, a Republican, as saying, "We should be looking for ways to help our fishermen get back on their feet so they can continue creating jobs and contributing to the New England economy instead of burdening our already-struggling fishing industry with even more job-killing regulations."

Thus, a veteran Iccat watcher told me, while Washington's heart may be in the right place, don't expect the United States, or, for that matter, Canada — concerned about its Iccat swordfish quota and potentially ready to cut a deal — to make waves.

Paradoxically, that might leave the environmentalists putting their hopes on Japan, which in March used backroom maneuvering to orchestrate the defeat of the Cites bluefin trade-ban proposal, arguing at the time that Iccat, not the United Nations, was the place to regulate tuna commerce.

Japan, the consumer of more than three-quarters of the catch, is now under pressure to show leadership, and Japanese officials have said they will support a fishing moratorium if Iccat nations call for it.

It could get more interesting yet.