



The Ethicurean

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Endangered, eh? Canada Scientists Confirm Bluefin Tuna Are in Deep Trouble

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It's official: We really are fishing to extinction a fish that has sustained us for millennia, the bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*). Last week Canada's scientists declared the Atlantic bluefin tuna endangered, meaning it faces imminent extirpation or extinction. The scientists found the populations at an all-time low, having declined 68 percent over the past two-and-a-half generations.

This science-based assessment is the first step in which the Atlantic bluefin tuna could be protected under Canada's Species At Risk Act (SARA). The assessment will be given to the federal environment minister in August, who has nine months to make a decision. Given the political nature and economic of the process, It's highly unlikely that Canada will give any protections to bluefin tuna. Canada has never protected a commercially fished species under SARA (including cod) and seems unlikely to start with bluefin; the country exports \$6 million to \$10 million a year of Atlantic bluefin tuna, almost entirely to Japan and the United States.

It's clear bluefin tuna badly need help, though. Since 1970, western Atlantic bluefin tuna have declined by more than 80 percent due to overfishing. Halfway through a 20-year "rebuilding program" for the severely depleted population, there are no more fish than at the beginning of the program. Also, the population took a hit with the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010, when oil and toxic chemicals coated some of its most important spawning habitat and killed an estimated 20 percent of young bluefin in the Gulf of Mexico.



So why is the news out of Canada so important? Canada is a powerhouse of bluefin tuna fishing. Prince Edward Island (yes, home of Anne of Green Gables – another major export) bills itself as the "Tuna Capital of the World." Canadians fish bluefin tuna "derby style" and caught their allocated fish in two days in 2010.

Canada's North Atlantic waters are home to the "giants": large bluefin tuna weighing hundreds, or even a thousand, pounds. Unlike in the United States, where fishermen have struggled to catch their quota in the past decade, landings in Canada have remained steady for the past 20 years. This is the home of the exotic, high-price bluefin tuna, exported straight to the Japanese and U.S. sushi markets.

Thus, along with Japan, Canada has been at the forefront of opposition to bluefin tuna conservation measures. In March 2010, the United States supported banning trade in bluefin tuna at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild

Flora and Fauna (CITES). Canada, Japan and 66 other countries voted to defeat the proposal, which may have been the most effective measure to combat rampant illegal bluefin tuna catch.

It's exciting, then, to think that this proclamation could turn bluefin tuna into a national conservation issue in Canada rather than the politicians' pet industry (the United States is not immune to this problem either, as a recently-introduced bill by Rep. Guinta (R-NH) that would forbid Atlantic bluefin from being added to the endangered species list illustrates). If Canada cared as much about rebuilding bluefin tuna stocks as it does about how quickly it can catch bluefin tuna (see above, two days), it would literally make a world of difference for the bluefin. Without Canada as an ally, Japan's opposition would be weaker. With Canada as an ally, the United States could take aggressive steps to reduce fishing in the western Atlantic without worrying about forfeiting its fishing rights to its northern neighbor.

The United States is poised to make its own endangered status determination, due next week. Unlike Canada's SARA, the U.S. listing determination under the Endangered Species Act must be based on science, not taking into account economic factors. But politics play a large part in U.S. listings too. For example, when the National Marine Fisheries Service undertook a bluefin tuna scientific status review late last year, a half dozen New England politicians from both parties opposed the review itself. Update: On May 27, the U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service declined to add the Atlantic bluefin tuna to the endangered species list. More information about the decision can be found at the NMFS (PDF), in a press release from the Center for Biological Diversity, a post by Barry Estabrook at the Atlantic and a post by Jaeah Lee at Mother Jones' Blue Marble.

The best way for the public to reclaim bluefin tuna — as a symbol of the power and majesty of our healthy oceans — is to speak up as consumers. A Canadian newspaper's poll showed more than 90 percent of readers said Atlantic bluefin tuna should be listed. Although vocal, the minority — the industry that profits from bluefin fishing — has not set the bluefin's fate in stone. Ask your local restaurant not to serve bluefin tuna and pledge their commitment. Write your congressperson supporting protections. Let bluefin tuna off the hook.