



*for a living planet*

WWF Mediterranean  
Programme Office  
Via Po 25/c  
00198 Rome  
Italy

Tel: +39 346 387 3237  
Fax: +39 06 841 3866  
[www.panda.org/mediterranean](http://www.panda.org/mediterranean)

## BLUEFIN TUNA IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

### Frequently Asked Questions

#### 1. What is Atlantic bluefin tuna (BFT)?

Atlantic BFT is a large predatory fish found in the western and eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea. Most catches are taken from the Mediterranean, and this supports the most important BFT fishery in the world – in terms of amount of catches and quality of fish.

#### 2. What is ICCAT?

ICCAT is the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, a regional fisheries management organisation. Established 42 years ago, ICCAT is composed of 45 Contracting Parties which have the mandate to monitor and sustainably manage the stocks of tuna and tuna-like species in the Atlantic and Mediterranean.

#### 3. What is the status of the species?

Atlantic BFT is severely overexploited. The spawning population of the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean stock is currently less than 40 per cent of the level it was in the early '70s. Current fishing mortality, estimated at over 60,000 tonnes per year, is more than three times the threshold level to avoid overfishing which, according to ICCAT scientists, will result in a high risk of stock collapse if nothing is done.

#### 4. How do we know that the BFT is overexploited in the Mediterranean?

The Standing Committee on Research and Statistics (SCRS) is responsible for the collection, compilation, analysis and dissemination of fishery statistics, and is the scientific advisory for ICCAT. The SCRS conducts ongoing research on BFT in the Mediterranean, including stock assessment, age at maturity, larval surveys and tagging programs.

#### 5. How could 60,000 tonnes of BFT have been fished in 2007, if the stock is collapsing?

Stock collapse does not mean that there are no more tuna left in the sea. What it means is that we are fishing too many tuna for the population to be able to recover, through reproduction, what we have fished out. We are fishing much more tonnes of tuna than the stocks are able to reproduce themselves, and this unbalanced, unsustainable exploitation will lead to inevitable stock collapse.

#### 6. What are the causes of overexploitation?

The BFT fishery has been chronically mismanaged by ICCAT and is currently running out of control, fuelled by widespread violations of regional fisheries management rules by an ever-expanding fleet, and by the recent unrestricted expansion of tuna farms. These in turn are fuelled by the booming market for sushi and sashimi, predominantly in Japan but increasingly in the US and Europe, and the high prices fetched for the high quality meat. A very significant share of all BFT harvested in Mediterranean waters qualifies as illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing (IUU). Total actual catches of BFT stock in the Mediterranean have been some 50 per cent higher than the official quota set by ICCAT for at least the past decade.



### **7. How many vessels are competing to catch BFT in the Mediterranean?**

Approximately 60 per cent of the current BFT captures in the Mediterranean are by industrial purse seine vessels, while the other 40 per cent are by other fishing gears such as longliners, traps, bait boats, pelagic trawlers and hand line boats. In 2008, the purse seine fleet alone consists of 614 operational vessels from the 11 coastal states of Algeria, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Libya, Malta, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey, with a catch capacity almost double the Total Allowable Catch (TAC) set by ICCAT (28,500 tonnes in 2008) – more than 3½ times the catch levels advised by scientists to avoid stock collapse (15,000 tonnes).

### **8. Which countries are the worst culprits in fleet overcapacity in the Mediterranean?**

The worst culprits for Mediterranean BFT purse seine fleet overcapacity are Turkey, Italy, Croatia, Libya, France and Spain, in that order. Italy is the worst culprit among EU Member States in terms of number of vessels, whereas France is the worst culprit in terms of greatest total annual catch potential in metric tonnes.

### **9. What have been the recent management measures taken by ICCAT?**

ICCAT has gravely failed to impose effective management measures on the Mediterranean BFT fishery. In November 2006, ICCAT ignored the advice of its own scientific committee and adopted a management plan with a TAC almost twice the level recommended to avoid stock collapse. On paper, it did adopt some new management measures, for example banning spotter planes and trans-shipments, however, these measures were not implemented, and the 2007 fishing season saw another massacre of the Mediterranean BFT population. In November 2007, WWF thus requested more drastic management measures, by calling for an immediate 3-year closure of the fishery. Sadly, only Canada and the USA supported the proposal, while other countries involved in the fishery even succeeded in getting an increased overall quota for the 2008 fishery.

### **10. What is the EU's responsibility in BFT mismanagement?**

The EU holds more than half of the total BFT quota allocated by ICCAT, and has a massive purse seine fleet that has been almost completely renewed during the last 10 years thanks to EU subsidies (at least in France and Spain) through the EU's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). Public funds have also been allocated to farming facilities, which have exponentially increased in capacity and show an ever-growing demand for live tuna from industrial purse seiners.

### **11. Hasn't the EU closed the Mediterranean BFT fishery to its fleets?**

In September 2007, the European Commission closed the fishery to its member states for the rest of the year, as European fleets had reached their annual quota. However, this closure should have happened months earlier, as by September the EU had overfished its quota by a massive 4,000 tonnes. In June 2008 the EC was faster to react to the racing rates of exploitation, and closed the fishery to its member states 15 days before the official end of the season. This move, however, was far from sufficient to save this species from sure collapse, and more far-reaching, permanent management measures are urgently needed.

### **12. Has there been better monitoring and control in the 2008 fishing season?**

Although the European Commission dedicated an entire control agency to the BFT fishery in 2008, and the fishery was indeed closed early to EU member states, the fishery was far from being out of danger from corruption and illegal fishing. For example, at the beginning of the fishing season, WWF sources identified two pirate purse seine vessels operating in Mediterranean waters. The unregistered vessels, originally flagged as Bolivian and docked in the European port of Malta, were then reflagged as Libyan and set sail to plunder bluefin tuna



from the Mediterranean. Further, field evidence was obtained revealing that two Italian spotter planes were being used to provide illegal aerial assistance to industrial tuna fleets fishing in the central Mediterranean, in the waters between the islands of Malta, Pantelleria and Lampedusa – an area where at least 28 Italian industrial tuna fishing vessels are active.

### **13. Why is ICCAT's November 2008 meeting so important?**

In November 2008, ICCAT representatives will meet in Marrakech, Morocco, to revise the BFT management plan that will be in force for the next two years. Given the dramatic state of BFT stocks, it is imperative that a management plan is adopted this year that is based on scientific advice, and which will ensure the sustainability of the species and fishery for years to come. WWF considers this meeting as a last chance to influence key decisions by ICCAT on the fate of this vulnerable species.

### **14. What have been the latest developments leading up to this meeting?**

#### ***What were the results of ICCAT's independent review?***

In September 2008, an independent expert review of ICCAT – commissioned by the organization itself – considered the eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery an “international disgrace” and a “travesty of fisheries management”. The experts recommended an immediate closure of the fishery by ICCAT – until a management plan is put in place that follows scientific advice, including the closure of all key spawning areas.

#### ***What happened at the IUCN world congress in Barcelona?***

In early October 2008, the crisis situation of the BFT fishery was also acknowledged in the overwhelming vote by government and NGO members of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) at the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, calling for the closure of the Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery – until it can be brought under control – and establishing protected areas in the main breeding grounds. Surprising votes were by Japan and Spain, which are considered key market and fishing nations of BFT respectively.

#### ***What was the outcome of the ICCAT scientific committee's 2008 assessment of BFT?***

Finally, ICCAT's own scientific committee published its most damning assessment yet of the state of eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna, showing that actual annual catch is likely double total allowable catch and over four times the level deemed sustainable by scientists, and that less than 40% of the fragile spawning biomass is left compared to 30 years ago. Scientists therefore recommend bold management overhaul to save bluefin from collapse:

- extend closed season to fully cover main spawning period of May and June,
- cut total allowable catch to between 8,500 tonnes and 15,000 tonnes, and
- impose bold time-area closures including key spawning areas.

### **15. What does WWF want to achieve at the ICCAT meeting in November 2008?**

WWF calls on ICCAT Contracting Parties to:

- Adopt a temporary suspension of fishing for bluefin tuna in the East Atlantic and Mediterranean. The fishing ban should last until conditions conducive to the meaningful enforcement of management rules are in place.
- Adopt a new recovery plan strictly adhering to scientific advice from ICCAT's scientific committee. The plan must include a TAC of between 8,500 and 15,000 tonnes per year, the establishment of bold time/area closures covering the main spawning grounds and breeding season, and a radical and credible capacity reduction plan, to be implemented immediately.



## **16. What would happen if BFT were to collapse in the Mediterranean?**

The loss of the BFT fishery would be an economic, sociocultural and ecological disaster. There are some 1,700 commercial and over 10,000 recreational boats that target BFT in the Mediterranean, clearly depicting the scale of job-loss which would be entailed by the collapse of the BFT fishery. The ecological extinction of this species would have unpredictable cascading effects in the Mediterranean ecosystem and entail serious consequences to many other species in the food web.

## **17. Could BFT be produced through aquaculture?**

Current tuna farming activities in the Mediterranean do not involve aquaculture. Rather, they involve the enclosure in floating pens or cages of live wild-caught BFT captured by industrial purse seine fleets, which are kept for about six months for fattening before selling for high prices for Japanese sushi and sashimi. The only tuna species that has been successfully aquacultured (i.e. reared from aquacultured hatchlings) is another species of tuna, the Pacific bluefin tuna, in Japan. This product is now available on the global market, but has not had much success – it is rumoured to be expensive and of inferior taste. The aquaculture of tuna species is considered highly unsustainable as their large predatory nature requires them to be fed on smaller wild-caught fish, putting pressure on other fish stocks like sardines and cancelling out any possible conservation effect. Furthermore, BFT from aquaculture would represent a different product on the market – with poorer quality taste and fat content – and would thus not eliminate demand for wild-caught tuna.

## **18. Hasn't WWF already asked for a boycott of BFT?**

No. In April 2007, after ICCAT failed to adjust the TAC according to scientific advice, WWF called upon ICCAT contracting parties to voluntarily reduce their TAC by 50 per cent, and called upon major European retailers to support this campaign by reducing their marketing of BFT. At this time an impressive seventeen retailers and organisations joined WWF's call.

## **19. Is BFT sold in my country?**

In the two-year period of 2004-2005, some 33,788,590 kg of processed fresh and frozen Mediterranean BFT were imported by the EU, whilst 52,805,389 kg were imported by Japan, and 871,592 kg by the US. BFT is thus sold in almost all European countries. Within the EU, 15 per cent of the 2004-2005 imports went to non-Mediterranean countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Germany, United Kingdom, and Holland.

## **20. What else can be done to reduce fishing pressure? Is retraining available?**

Considering the bloated BFT fleet in the Mediterranean, the scrapping of a large number of vessels is necessary to achieve sustainability in this fishery. The European Fisheries Fund (EFF) has money available to aid the permanent scrapping of BFT fishing vessels. Options are also available to help EU fishermen with job diversification and the temporary cessation of fishing activities. Although WWF is asking for a moratorium, the long term objective is not to alleviate fishing of BFT altogether in the Mediterranean, but to achieve a level of fishing that is in balance with the capacities of nature.

## **21. . What can consumers do?**

Until ICCAT has agreed a satisfactory recovery plan and the fishery is under control, WWF strongly advises that consumers avoid Atlantic BFT.

## **22. How can I boycott BFT...?**

*...when I go to my favourite Japanese restaurant for sushi and sashimi?*



Check with your restaurateur whether they use Atlantic BFT in their dishes. If yes, WWF advises that you avoid it.

***...when I visit my fishmonger or fish market to buy fresh tuna for tuna steak?***

In the EU, there is a decade-old regulation that fish vendors must display the name, scientific name, and origin of capture of their merchandise. It is thus your fishmonger's responsibility to provide you with the correct information about the fish you are buying. If it is not displayed, ask your fishmonger whether the tuna is Atlantic BFT, and if so, do not buy it. Importantly, there are other red flesh tunas, such as bigeye and yellowfin tuna fished in tropical waters, which are currently safer to consume.

***...when I buy tuna from my supermarket?***

When buying a tin of tuna off the supermarket shelf for a tuna sandwich or salade niçoise, there is little concern as tinned tuna is almost never bluefin. Most is yellowfin or skipjack.

**Pledge your support of the Mediterranean bluefin tuna boycott with WWF at:**

[www.passport.panda.org](http://www.passport.panda.org)

**23. What is WWF's new tagging project?**

In January 2008, WWF began a three year tagging project in the Mediterranean Sea, funded by the Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation, which aims to better understand the migration and behavioural patterns of BFT. The results obtained are expected to provide valuable information on the migration routes, daily routine, and reproductive behaviour of BFT, which can ultimately be used as a basis for better management of the Mediterranean populations.

**24. Where can I find more information about eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna?**

Visit WWF's website dedicated to bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean: [www.panda.org/tuna](http://www.panda.org/tuna)