

Bluefin on the brink



Photo by Thomas P. Peschak / Save our Seas Foundation

Life without sushi...? Judging by the popularity of the fishy food across the world, one wonders if we could cope. But the day those perfectly timed (not too slow for fashion conscious diners to lose patience - not too fast to dry out the fish) conveyor belts present little more than rice and seaweed could be just around the corner.



BOYCOTT BLUEFIN: Think twice before selecting your sushi

Sushi craze is pushing one special tuna close to extinction, reports Ocean Correspondent Cheryl-Samantha Owen

The Japanese-born sushi trend has turned out to be as big a threat to our oceans as pollution and warming temperatures. Tuna, especially bluefin tuna, crowns the menu for sushi lovers and forms the basis of many fisheries world-wide. All seven commercially fished species are being unsustainably exploited and three are already listed on the IUCN's Red List as threatened with extinction. Though they may be the golden goose for the fishing industry today, these magnificent fish will soon become the dodos of the sea if they are not offered immediate protection. More than half a century of overfishing is pushing the bluefin to the brink, and scientists estimate that stocks are within three years of total collapse. The stock of Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna has already dropped below 15 per cent of its pre-exploitation levels, qualifying it for a ban on trade under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Due to the rarity premium paid by diners, it is very possible that the bounty on their heads will ensure that bluefin are hunted to actual extinction. Last month a single bluefin tuna sold at a Japanese auction for \$175,000.

Perverse as it is, the faster the tuna population plummets, the higher the price of this fish soars. Pound for pound, bluefin can be more valuable than ivory. Most people find the idea of tucking into a plate of elephant, snow leopard, whale, dolphin, or any of the perceived "cuddly" creatures of our world hard to swallow, yet serving up slices of this marvellous apex predator is like dining on sashimi of African cheetah. The name tuna stems from the Greek "to rush" and for good reason. The bluefin tuna can reach bursts of speed of 90 kilometres per hour. Its extraordinary internal and external designs combine to ignite an explosive power that gives the fish its astonishing attack capability. It is one of the most highly evolved of all fishes. Starting life as microscopic larvae they can reach 15-feet in length and grow to almost 700 kilogrammes. It's the widest ranging of the tunas - stretching from the tropics to the Arctic. Once revered and traditionally fished in the Mediterranean for three millennia, today there is a scramble to catch the last bluefin. Gone are they days when bluefin the size of cows were landed and fishing was fair.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Avoid eating bluefin and bigeye tuna
- If you don't know what the tuna is, where it came from and how it was caught - don't eat it. (Tuna cans often omit this information).
- Boycott restaurants that serve endangered species, such as bluefin tuna.
- The CITES meets in March this year to debate the fate of tuna. Encourage your government to ban the trade on bluefin tuna.

Today fishermen are catching fish a third of the size in massive purse-seine nets that can capture three hundred fish in a single haul of the net. With spotter planes radioing to boat captains the location of schooling bluefin below and "super freezers" stockpiling thousands of tonnes for a time when they have emptied our seas - the bluefin and other shark species like it do not stand a chance. They will lose the battle unless immediate action is taken. Tuna farming or ranching is no panacea. Tuna ranching relies on the capture of juveniles from the wild. It removes immature bluefin before they have even had a chance to spawn. In addition, almost 20 pounds of fish go into the feed that makes one pound of bluefin - a ratio even worse than prawn farming. The end of wild stocks will be the end of ranching and the end of bluefin sashimi.

For more information on apex predators and how you can help please visit: www.saveourseas.com

