

Sushi Slaughter
By Tiffany Wang

Akami. Toro. Chutoro. Otoro. These are various parts of a tuna one can order in a sushi restaurant anywhere in the world. Sushi has exploded in popularity within recent decades, becoming one of the largest markets in Japan and one of the biggest trends in American dining. Japan is the leading consumer of one of the world's most endangered fishes: the Atlantic bluefin tuna. The country consumes $\frac{3}{4}$ of the globe's bluefin tuna catch as sushi or sashimi. The current boom in sushi dining has put the world's favorite fish at risk. Every bite of "Toro" or tuna sushi damages the Atlantic bluefin tuna populations more, to the tipping point where their numbers are too decimated to recover. Unless humans change, we as members of Earth, will guarantee the extinction of an entire species.

Bluefin tuna has not always been the most popular sushi fish in the world. Before 1970, bluefin sport fishing was exclusively recreational because giant bluefin tuna had a commercial value of only \$.05 per pound.¹ The Japanese considered bluefin tuna to be unclean, only fit for cats and dogs. After 1970, the bluefin tuna became a delicacy. This spike in its popularity correlates with the appearance of new low-end sushi restaurants. Fishermen learned that freezing tuna at low temperatures would virtually guarantee no expiration date for the fish. It was then marketed globally as an inexpensive, yet tasty form of sushi. As the industry supplied the global market with more bluefin tuna, it fueled demand, which created a "gold rush" for the bluefin tuna. Its explosive popularity has aptly dubbed the bluefin tuna as the "king of sushi."²

As sushi becomes a universal food, the fishing for the bluefin tuna has spiked to meet the ever-increasing demand. The fishers are helped by modern technology like the "purse seiner."

¹ "Atlantic Bluefin Tuna." *Marine Bio*. Marine Bio, 2010. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://marinebio.org/species.asp?id=236>>.

² "The King of Sushi." 60 Minutes. CBS Interactive Inc., 7 Sept 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/11/60minutes/main3700644_page3.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>.

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The invention of the “purse seiner” in the 1990s virtually revolutionized tuna fishing. Now, a single fishing vessel could encircle and ensnare up to 3,000 bluefins in 1 trip.³ It’s no wonder that the bluefin tuna is currently “critically endangered.” It’s time that we, as humans, used our many advances to help out our animal neighbors, rather than facilitate their slaughter.

The surge in bluefin tuna fishing has led to a dramatic decline in the bluefin tuna population, especially in the Atlantic/Mediterranean. The stocks of bluefin tuna are rapidly declining, already dropping an alarming 60% within the past 13 years.⁴ Due to its high value, illegal fishing further diminishes its numbers. In 2007, the total catch was estimated at over 61,100 tons.⁵ The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna advises that tuna catch should be restricted to 7,500 tons to keep the current population stable. This means that humans are fishing the bluefin tuna at 817% above sustainable levels. The Atlantic Eastern stock of bluefin tuna, which spawns in the Mediterranean, is especially in danger. They are being fished at 2-3x their sustainable levels. Barbara A. Block, a marine biologist in Stanford University, finds it hard to believe that “a fish of this size and beauty, an animal that had captured the hearts of fishermen and scientists alike for millennia, is slipping off the Earth.”⁶ At current rates of fishing, the WWF (World Wildlife Fund) estimates that the bluefin tuna population will be entirely decimated within 3 years.⁷

³ "The King of Sushi." 60 Minutes. CBS Interactive Inc., 7 Sept 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2008/01/11/60minutes/main3700644_page3.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>.

⁴ Blair, Gavin. "Japan sighs relief as bluefin tuna ban fails." The Christian Science Monitor. The Christian Science Monitor, 19 Mar 2010. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/0319/Japan-sighs-relief-as-bluefin-tuna-ban-fails>>.

⁵ "Endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna formally recommended for international trade ban - Algerian official arrested." Wildlifeextra.com. Wildlifeextra.com, 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/bluefin-tuna938.html#cr>>.

⁶ "Tracking the Imperiled Bluefin From Ocean to Sushi Platter ." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 03 May 2005. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/03/science/earth/03tuna.html?_r=3&pagewanted=3>.

⁷ McDermott, Matthew. "Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Will Be Gone in 3 Years At Current Fishing Rates." Treehugger. A Discovery Company, 04 April 2009. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/04/atlantic-bluefin-tuna-gone-in-3-years-current-fishing-rates.php>>.

How could such a decline have occurred? One problem is corruption within the government, which expedites illegal fishing and further devastates the already-low numbers. Recently, the General Secretary and the Director of Algerian fisheries have been charged with illegal fishing activities during the 2009 fishing season. They were directly involved with the capture and laundering of 210 tons of bluefin tuna.⁸ It is officials like the General Secretary and the Director who have made the rampant destruction among the bluefin tuna species possible. They succumbed to their greedy human natures and became engrossed in selfish, short-term profits, while disregarding any possible future consequences of their actions.

Similarly, many sushi restaurant owners fall prey to their own gluttonous desires of profit and wealth. Due to the high profits from the sought-after bluefin tuna, popular restaurants often ignore the bluefin tuna's critically endangered status and pass it off as a non-endangered fish on their menus. Recently, Nobu, a popular sushi restaurant, has been caught serving Atlantic bluefin tuna in its London restaurants. Undercover investigators from Greenpeace asked the staff of the restaurants to identify the types of tuna from the menu items that were described only in Japanese. None of the staff members informed them that it was the endangered fish, but through DNA testing, the mysterious tuna was revealed to be the Atlantic bluefin tuna. Although it is not illegal to serve the fish, chefs in London have stopped serving it because of its critically endangered rating. That is, except for Nobu's chefs. This incident reveals that more stringent measures of regulation in the sale of sushi must be introduced. Greenpeace members should continue to randomly test the sushi in restaurants, so restaurant owners have more incentive to be truthful about the fish they sell.

⁸ . "Algerian officials, ship owners charged with illegal fishing." Tuna Seiners. Tuna Seiners, 16 Oct 2009. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://tunaseiners.com/blog/2009/10/algerian-officials-ship-owners-charged-with-illegal-fishing/>>.

Despite the dangerously low numbers of bluefin tuna, there are steps we can all take to ensure their survival. Firstly, quotas must be set at levels that can allow for sustainable growth. In 2008, the new quota levels for bluefin tuna were described as a “mockery of science.”⁹ Those quota levels ignored the mounting evidence that the East Atlantic bluefin tuna populations would be listed as an endangered species. Political pressure must not play a role in quota statistics, seeing as it has impeded measures that could have protected the tuna in the past. The International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tuna recommended that the bluefin tuna catch be restricted to 7,500 tons to keep the current population stable, but the quota remained at 22,500 tons after pressure from the European Union.¹⁰ In order to minimize political pressure and bias, the scientists who set the quotas must have equal representation from each country. This would promote a democratic approach so each country has a voice regarding fishing regulation in their own country, and may be more likely to follow the restrictions.

Along with reasonable new quota levels, there must be increased enforcement of such restrictions. Sergi Tuleda, Head of Fisheries and WWF Mediterranean, recognizes this, saying, “Mediterranean (Atlantic) bluefin tuna is collapsing as we speak and yet the fishery will kick off again tomorrow for business as usual.”¹¹ Someone needs to regulate the fisheries before they destroy the entire ocean. More control is necessary particularly in the Central Atlantic, where the fishes’ feeding area straddles boundary lines of various countries. In this section of the Atlantic Ocean, the Atlantic bluefin tuna are being severely fished by many countries with almost no

⁹ McDermott, Matthew. "New Bluefin Tuna Quota Levels Are A “Mockery of Science”." Treehugger. A Discovery Company, 25 Nov 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/11/new-bluefin-tuna-quota-levels-a-mockery-of-science.php>>.

¹⁰ McDermott, Matthew. "New Bluefin Tuna Quota Levels Are A “Mockery of Science”." Treehugger. A Discovery Company, 25 Nov 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2008/11/new-bluefin-tuna-quota-levels-a-mockery-of-science.php>>.

¹¹ McDermott, Matthew. "Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Will Be Gone in 3 Years At Current Fishing Rates." Treehugger. A Discovery Company, 04 April 2009. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2009/04/atlantic-bluefin-tuna-gone-in-3-years-current-fishing-rates.php>>.

monitoring. More regulation in areas like the Central Atlantic Ocean would surely increase the surviving population of bluefin tuna.

Perhaps the most important factor in the preservation of the bluefin tuna is a lifestyle change in humans. People must be educated about the various types of endangered fishes on the menus of their favorite sushi restaurants. When they are given the knowledge they can act. Programs such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium distribute mini pamphlets that provide a sustainable seafood guide. The guide lists the types of fish in restaurants that should be avoided, the ones that are unsustainably fished or farmed. More importantly, the guides list better alternatives for more sustainable eating. For example, salmon roe, Albacore tuna, and Spanish mackerel are all better choices than the Bluefin tuna. A nationally-funded distribution of these pamphlets, particularly near sushi restaurants, would provide diners an easy way to make their habits more eco-friendly. There must also be pamphlets targeted to youth because educating the future generations would assist them in making better food choices.

The simplest answer to the Atlantic bluefin tuna population dilemma comes from John Hovecar, the Greenpeace Oceans campaign director. He simply says, "Don't sell it. Don't buy it. Don't eat it. Critically endangered species are not food."¹² Would you eat a tiger or a gorilla? The Atlantic bluefin tuna is in as much danger of extinction as the other animals, but its role as a popular food has hindered attempts to save the species. We must no longer remain silent as Atlantic bluefin tuna continues to be fished, sold, and eaten every day. As humans, we must have the best interests of the world ecosystem at heart and the survival of the bluefin tuna is crucial to the stability of the Earth. Let us learn from our past mistakes, so they do not become the pitfalls

¹² "Endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna formally recommended for international trade ban - Algerian official arrested." Wildlifeextra.com. Wildlifeextra.com, 2008. Web. 31 Mar 2010. <<http://www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/bluefin-tuna938.html#cr>>.

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of the future generations. Let us educate. Let us speak out for the rights of all animals to share
this world in peace.

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