



Commercial Fisheries News

AUGUST 2011 • Volume 38 Number 10 • A Compass Publication

*Brothers Tim and Dan Eilertsen at the bow of their scalloper Discovery.
(Steven Kennedy photo)*

Requiem for 'iconic bluefin' extinction myth

This is the first installment of a multipart guest column by industry advocate Rich Ruais written in response to repeated attempts by environmental groups and others to have bluefin tuna declared a threatened or endangered species.

In these columns, Ruais will discuss the history of the fishery, as well as bluefin science and management, and argue that this history supports putting to rest once and for all the idea that Atlantic bluefin tuna are on the verge of extinction.
—Editor

Since 1974, there have been six major efforts – five in the US and one in Canada – to list Atlantic bluefin tuna as a species that is threatened or endangered with being fished to extinction.

Yet, during the last 37 years of extinction talk, annual Atlantic-wide bluefin tuna landings have varied from approximately 25,000 metric tons (mt) to more than an estimated 60,000 mt.

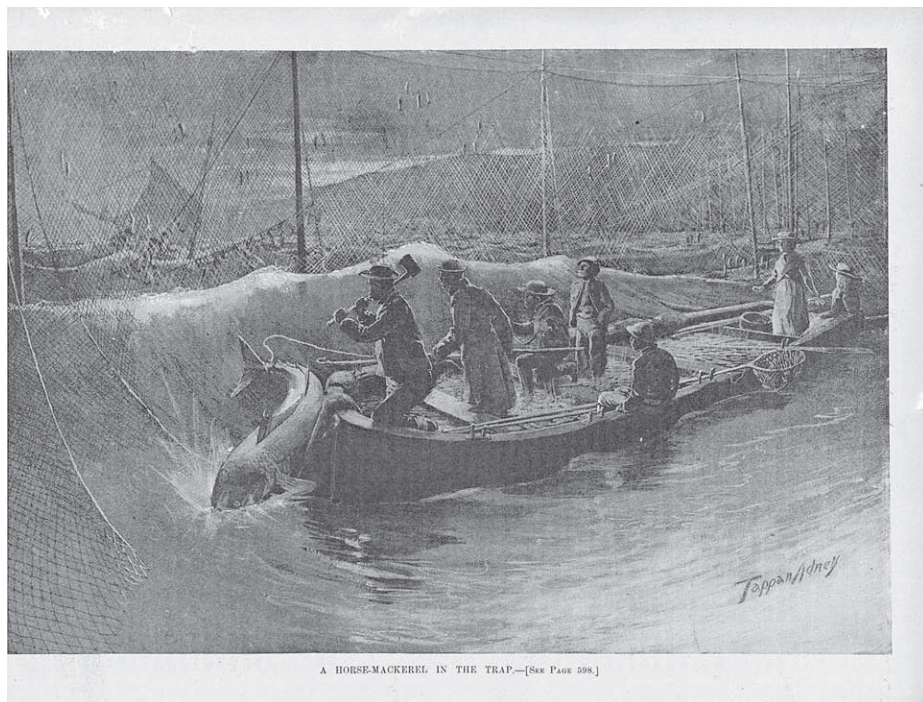
The July 2011 *Commercial Fisheries News* ably reported the main facts and latest peer-reviewed science used by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to reject the most recent assault on the bluefin fishery – a petition from the Center for Biological Diversity to list bluefin as threatened or endangered (see CFN July 2011, “ESA report details up-to-date bluefin science”).

Given the histories of both the eastern and western fisheries, major scientific advancements, a debunking of the critically flawed 1981 decision to arbitrarily establish a management boundary line between east and west stocks, and the consistent rejection of these repeated attempts to mischaracterize the status of the resource, most fishermen are wondering this:

Why all the fuss and wasting of precious resources on silly extinction listings when that time, energy, and money could have been spent improving our understanding of the fish?

Who's behind it?

Both national fishery agencies and environmental nongovernmental organizations (ENGOS) have initiated these threatened/endangered status efforts, citing overfishing or, most



A HORSE-MACKEREL IN THE TRAP.—[See Page 598.]

Scan courtesy of Rich Ruais

It was common for “horse mackerel,” or “tunny” as giant tuna were called, to invade mackerel traps along the coast of Maine looking for an easy meal, only to be axed by the trappers.

recently, the combined effects of overfishing and the 2010 British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

No doubt, some of the proposed listings came from individuals and organizations sincerely concerned about the resource.

However, others have

engaged in these pursuits to exploit the economic prosperity that comes from “extinction campaigns” or for the notoriety and fame that comes from worldwide media attention or out of sheer ignorance. Some were motivated by all of the above.

As a result of these relentless campaigns, the “magnificent” bluefin tuna has evolved into the “charismatic” giant bluefin and now into the “iconic” giant bluefin. This increasingly lofty labeling also has helped to support and define the lucrative careers of several high-profile scientists, doomsday book authors, and ENGO leaders.

The US government, too, has used “extinction proposals” as leverage when seeking support for questionable unilateral western Atlantic conservation measures or as justification for illegitimate domestic objectives such as limiting commercial utilization or

instituting regional shifts in major fisheries.

We’ll look at each of the six extinction proposals in more detail in later installments of this “requiem for the ‘iconic bluefin’ extinction myth,” but first, some background to put those developments in perspective.

Information gaps

The 9,000-year history of Atlantic bluefin tuna fishing is well established on both sides of the Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea. Although there are huge time gaps where detailed descriptions are unavailable and will likely never be known, we do know that the fisheries were sustained and the species survived.

Interestingly, these gaps in the history of the fisheries are equally matched or surpassed by what remains unknown about the biology and ecology of bluefin.

We still do not understand stock structure, the usefulness of applying classic stock concepts to bluefin tuna, the full range of migration patterns and spawning areas, the basics of natural mortality, the reality of apparent differences in age and size of sexual maturity in various populations, and much more.

These crucial information gaps

GUEST COLUMN

by Rich Ruais



continue to hinder effective and efficient conservation and management plans despite intensive research efforts involving millions of dollars, euros, and yen over the last 40 years, particularly over the last two decades.

Ironically, our limited critical scientific understanding is the driving force for overzealous campaigns for exotic protection regimes. In the end, it is also what makes the “extinction” drives look foolish and appear to be motivated by groups and individuals that despise commercial and even recreational fishing.

This is especially true in light of the fundamental, longstanding understandings about bluefin that we do have:

- There are multiple bluefin tuna populations and spawning grounds;
- The female bluefin is highly fecund;
- Bluefin productivity can be high; and
- The Atlantic-wide distribution range of these fish is massive.

All of these confirmed factors combined make the possibility of bluefin tuna extinction remote and miniscule.

Eastern, Med

Fisheries for bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean Sea and Eastern Atlantic have existed since at least 7,000 BC with the primary harvest method being fixed traps, although artisanal handgears such as harpoons, handlines, and crude-to-sophisticated longlines have been employed.



Aristotle pondered on the origin and migration of bluefin tuna and his writings on the subject are referenced in many scientific publications.

Early writings and archaeological findings indicate that, beginning around 300 BC, Roman Empire army provisions included dried and salted “tunny fish,” as well as oysters, mussels, and cod. As Napoleon once noted, “An army marches on its stomach.”

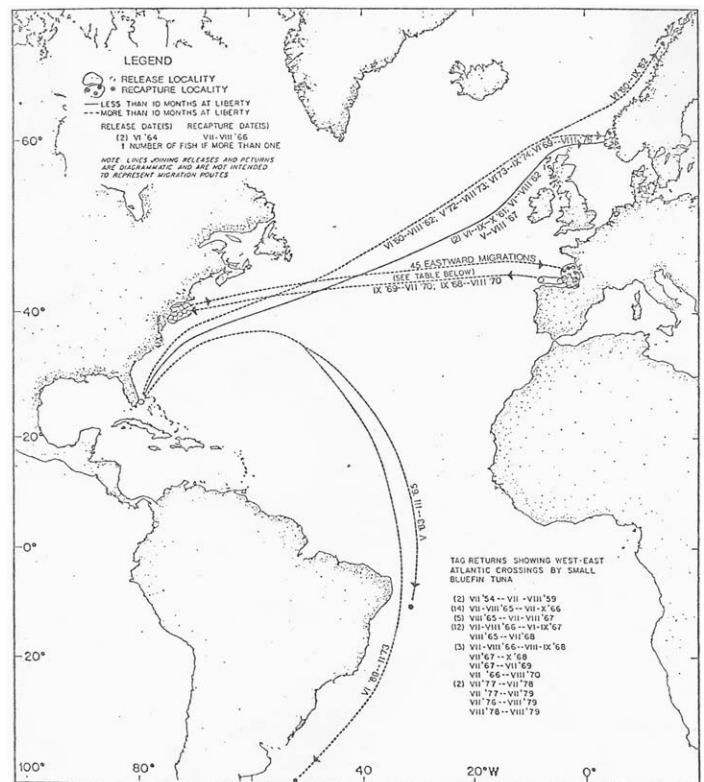
Roman gold coins featured raised tunas on one side. In her book “Mattanza: Love and Death in the Sea of Sicily,” author Theresa Maggio reported that a 4,000-year-old cave painting of a giant bluefin is the earliest evidence of giant tuna fishing near Sicily.

For those who find fishing on spawning aggregations of fish an unconscionably unwise practice under any circumstances, the Mediterranean fishery serves as the longest case history of sustainability of this practice – at least when the primary fishing gear is passive, fixed-trap gear.

Indeed, there is little doubt that, for many years, the bluefin tuna

Courtesy of Rich Ruais

Early writings and archaeological findings provide evidence that fisheries for bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean Sea and eastern Atlantic have existed since at least 7,000 BC. The Roman coin at left, which could be more than 2,000 years old, has a raised tuna on one side.



Courtesy of Rich Ruais

Transatlantic and transequatorial movements of bluefin tuna as documented by Frank Mather from tag returns obtained through 1979.

fishery in the Mediterranean was as important for the production of “bottarga” from the roe of the giant tuna (see story next page) as it was for the flesh or oils.

Western Atlantic

Although the history of fisheries for bluefin in the western Atlantic cannot match the longevity of the Mediterranean fisheries, it is well documented that Native Americans were fond of bluefin flesh, especially smoked.

One method of capture along the shores of Maine included locating giants stranded by outgoing tides in tidal pools, making them available for dispatch by tomahawk, an effective if somewhat messy technique.

It was also common for “horse mackerel,” or “tunny” as giant tuna were called, to invade mackerel traps along the coast of Maine looking for an easy meal, only to be axed by the trappers.

Early uses of bluefin caught by US commercial fishermen included gathering the oil behind the head and abdomen for lamp lights, canning and smoking the flesh for food, and grinding up the remains for pet food and fertilizer.

It is difficult to imagine either Indians or early Colonial fishermen fishing for cod on Stellwagen Bank in August with handlines and not occasionally having

Guest Column

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their live cod catch swallowed up by a giant.

Codfishing began along the coastal US and on Georges Bank and the Grand Banks in the 1600s or possibly earlier. Mark Kurlansky reports in his famous book “Cod” of five trips by the Vikings between 985 and 1011 to the “Woodland” in search of new codfishing grounds. If, as theorized, these trips actually were to Gulf of Maine waters, then western Atlantic interactions with bluefin tuna might have begun 500 years earlier than currently thought.

Harpoon-and-keg gear fishing by small boats from Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts for surface-swimming bluefin tuna began sometime during the 1930s, combining both limited but important commercial value and a summer seasonal sporting activity.

Purse seine fishing began sporadically during the 1930s but significant catches – 179 mt – were made in 1958 by the Provincetown, MA-based F/V Silver Mink. This same vessel set a record East Coast seine catch of 750 mt in a 56-day season in 1959.

Recreational use of “The World’s Top Big Game Fish” started in the 1930s with tournaments such as Nova Scotia’s Sharp Tournament Cup, which ran through the 1960s, the US Tuna Tournament out of Block Island, RI, and, more recently, the Sturdivant Island tournament, which started in 1998.

Since the end of the World Wars, dozens if not hundreds of tournaments from Texas to Maine have offered considerable cash prizes for the largest bluefin tuna or highest number of bluefin caught. Even a partial list of famous bluefin tuna anglers is impressive, including such notables as Ernest Hemingway, Roy Merritt, Frank Schaefer of the prestigious New York Athletic Club, and Don Slater, a Galilee, RI bluefin record holder.

The predecessor agency of the National Marine Fisheries Service, the Bureau of Commercial Fisheries, began exploring the possibility of a US commercial longline fishery for bluefin tuna in 1951. We’ll pick up the “modern era” story in the September CFN with the failure of the bureau to encourage a directed longline bluefin fishery and the successful development of the purse seine fishery, which began in 1961.

Rich Ruais

Rich Ruais, executive director of the American Bluefin Tuna Association, has been working with the bluefin tuna industry since 1991.



Photo courtesy of Rich Ruais

Pulling the roe sacs, which will be used to make bottarga, out of a bluefin tuna. The small size of the carcass is evidence, as scientists say, that bluefin in the east are sexually mature at much younger ages than in the west.

Sardinian delicacy ‘bottarga’ made from bluefin tuna roe

Bottarga is salted-and-cured fish roe traditionally made in Sardinia from bluefin tuna in full-spawn condition caught in traps. Roe sacs are placed in cloth bags, salted, and then lined up on planks, covered with additional planks, and weighed down with large stones. Finally, the sacs are hung from lines for a period of time.

The result is a semisolid bottarga that is traditionally sliced thin or ground and sprinkled on seafood pasta dishes all across Italy and the nearby islands. Many who have tried bottarga report the flavor “is the essence of the sea, fishy, but not in a bad way, and very briny from the salt.” Sprinkled over spaghetti and clam sauce, it is said “to instantly transport you to the seaside.”

During the 1980s and ’90s, then Boston-based fish dealer Jerry Abrams, an early US pioneer of the fresh giant export market to Japan, set up an operation to process and market trap fish in Sardinia.

Abrams and his longtime friend and colleague, Gloucester waterfront historian Mark Godfried, have shared many stories of regular pasta dinners with Sardinian locals, during which they all would “easily sprinkle the entire western bluefin tuna quota of 2,660 metric tons over each evening’s pasta meal.”

Their stories are in vivid contrast with strict implementation of the limited western quota and prohibition on fishing in the spawning grounds.

Rich Ruais



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