

Eastern Pacific tuna hang in the balance

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Next week marks a pivotal moment for Eastern Pacific tuna. The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), the international body charged with the conservation and management of tuna and associated species in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, will meet in San Diego from Nov. 2-7 to consider conservation measures for vulnerable tuna populations. Whether this 16-nation Commission will act to protect declining tuna stocks, or once again demonstrate their impotence to do so, remains to be seen. The fate of Pacific tuna stocks hangs in the balance.

Tuna populations are showing signs of trouble in the eastern tropical Pacific. Bigeye tuna populations are falling to low levels, the average size of captured yellowfin tuna is in decline and high levels of very small juvenile tuna are being caught accidentally. The Commission's own scientific staff have issued repeated warnings about these signs and urged nations to collectively adopt measures that include establishment of closure periods for overall stock recoveries, special closure areas where fish are most reproductively active and limits on annual catches. Despite five attempts in two years, the Commission has yet to agree on a single measure to address overfishing.

Too many fishermen chasing too few fish is a scenario that has been repeated for decades as a prelude to collapsed fisheries. Compounding the overcapacity problem are technological advancements which allow fishermen to locate and capture ever scarcer fish. Unfortunately, market forces exacerbate the problem; as stocks decline, fish prices rise and the pressure to expand fishing opportunities and cash in on the bonanza

increases. Not surprisingly, short-term economic gain routinely trumps the long term sustainability and profitability of the fishery.

Given the different priorities and negotiating positions of member states, the consensus required to adopt unanimous binding resolutions is proving impossible in the IATTC. In the absence of consensus, the default is not a ban on fishing, but an unmanaged fishery. Regrettably for the fish and for the people and businesses that depend on them, the impending ecological and economic disaster of a tuna collapse will not wait for member nations to work out their differences.

Although some nations have opted for unilateral measures, these tend to be weak, are ineffective unless other nations are adopting complementary measures and undermine the credibility and effectiveness of the IATTC that for more than 50 years has managed Eastern Pacific tuna stocks. Some nations have proven particularly unwilling to negotiate in accordance with the objectives of the Commission and the intent of the majority, undermining the spirit of compromise and flexibility that must underpin any multi-national organization. Far from being punished for this behavior, these nations simply continue to fish in the absence of conservation measures.

Continued failure by the Commission to reach consensus and adopt effective management strategies may signal a need to consider alternative, more inclusive, mechanisms to protect tuna and other marine resources. A growing coalition of some of the world's most influential conservation, animal protection, fishing and research organizations have repeatedly urged the IATTC to agree on tuna management measures and to more effectively engage a broader range of stakeholders in the decision-making process. "We all bear the cost of mismanagement," noted Meghan Jeans, Ocean Conservancy's Pacific fish conservation manager. "Fish are a public resource and as global citizens, we share in both the benefit and the burden of protecting them. There is no free

lunch."

Too often, conservation and management decisions are influenced by a small number of industry stakeholders that practically dictate the negotiating position of some member states. To ensure the health and sustainability of fish populations and the marine environment, conservation organizations, scientific and educational institutions, and other individuals and groups representing the public interest must play a role in international management forums. Likewise, tuna buyers, processors, retailers and consumers can positively influence the management process by rewarding those that provide sustainably caught seafood with their business.

"The IATTC historically conserved tuna and other marine life but that took dedication, diligence and collaboration on the part of its members, which has been missing in recent years," said Bill Fox, PhD, World Wildlife Fund vice president of fisheries. "Perhaps, it will take new management ideas and methods, like transferable catch shares, or pressure from the global tuna industry to recapture the necessary conservation spirit."

Scott Henderson, Conservation International's regional marine conservation director said that, "Less than one percent of the Eastern Pacific Ocean has been designated as Marine Protected Areas, which take on even greater importance as fish stocks decline to ensure that at least a few areas exist to allow fisheries to recover and to protect special, unique marine ecosystems. An important step in this direction would be for the IATTC to establish mechanisms to sanction member states that fail to respect protected area boundaries."

"An immediate and substantive reduction in commercial fishing capacity and effort is required," said Humane Society International's vice president Kitty Block. "Not enacting meaningful and enforceable

conservation measures will devastate this important fishery and ecosystem."

The eyes of the world will be on the IATTC next week and especially on those nations that have been least willing to compromise. The future of Pacific tuna populations hinges on the ability and willingness of member nations to heed the advice of scientists, engage a wider range of interest groups and demonstrate a willingness to negotiate and compromise.

Source: Conservation International

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