

UN meeting fails to protect marine species

March 25 2010, By MICHAEL CASEY , AP Environmental Writer



In this March 19, 2010 file photo, commuters pass by a popular tuna restaurant outside Tsukiji Wholesale Market in Tokyo. Dozens of Japanese government officials worked the floor the past two weeks ahead of key votes at the U.N. wildlife trade meeting which wraps up Thursday, March 25, 2010, in Doha, Qatar. The sign on right top reads "Highest quality bluefin tuna, Tskiji Sushi Number One." (AP Photo/David Guttenfelder)

(AP) -- Aggressive lobbying from Asian nations led by Japan killed all efforts to protect marine species at a U.N. meeting, leaving environmentalists fuming Thursday that efforts to conserve bluefin tuna and sharks were undermined by commercial interests.

The bid to regulate the trade was also hampered by concerns from poor nations that such measures would devastate their fishing economies at a time that many were just emerging from recession.

"This conference has been a disaster for conservation," said Oliver

Knowles of Greenpeace. "Country after country has come out at this meeting arguing for business as usual and continued trade in wildlife species that are already devastated by human activity."

The 175-nation Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, or CITES, opened two weeks ago with calls from the United States and Europeans to give a lifeline to overfished oceans. But the meeting ended Thursday with little to show their efforts.

A bid to ban the international export of [Atlantic bluefin tuna](#), which is key ingredient in sushi, was killed along with regulations on the pink and red coral trade. Six species of sharks failed to get protection despite studies showing their numbers had fallen by as much as 85 percent due to the booming fin trade in China and other parts of Asia.

The sole shark to get some measure of protection, the porbeagle shark, ended up losing it on the final day after Asian nations reopened the debate and voted down regulations. Some conservationists were visibly distraught when the vote tally was read.

"This is a significant setback for these [marine species](#) but we view it as only a temporary setback," Tom Strickland, who headed the American delegation, said in a statement. "We will redouble our efforts with other countries around the world to fight for the protection of marine species imperiled by international trade."

It wasn't a bust for all species. The meeting approved conservation plans to protect Asian big cats as well as rhinos. It also managed to kill proposals from Zambia and Tanzania to conduct one-off sales of their ivory stocks, over concerns they weren't doing enough to stop poaching.

Delegates also approved protection measures for 24 lesser plant, reptile and insect species, including the spectacular *Dynastes satanas* beetle and

the spiny-tailed iguanas of Latin America.

But these few protection measures were overshadowed by concerns that CITES has been transformed into a body driven by big money and trade. Some compared it to the U.N. climate conference, where decisions are often made in back rooms by world leaders.

"The minute money gets involved, everything is different," CITES Secretary-General Willem Wijnstekers said. "Countries that consistently vote for conservation then vote the other way. I'm a bit lost."

Japan, for many, illustrated the changing face of CITES. It led the campaign against the listing of the marine species and spent months before the meeting lobbying aggressively.

They held a reception for select representatives at their embassy in Qatar, offering up Atlantic bluefin tuna sushi - a typical food served at Japanese formal occasions - the night before the vote on the export ban of the overfished species.

"Japan clearly mobilized massive efforts to keep fisheries out of CITES," said Mark W. Roberts of the watchdog group Environmental Investigation Agency.

Hisashi Endo, the director of the Ecosystem and Conservation Office in the Fisheries Agency of Japan, said its delegates stuck to the facts. They argued that regional fisheries bodies were better suited to regulate marine species and that the CITES ban was unfair.

"We are not pressuring anyone," Endo said. "We are talking to many countries and expressing our opinion and seeking their understanding."

But some delegates accused Japan of using tactics that went beyond

diplomacy and violated the spirit of CITES.

Kenya, which fought the Japanese over tuna, accused Tokyo of pressuring delegates to support its positions and paying fisheries officials from unnamed African countries to attend the conference.

"The way we have seen this conference operate, there is a lot of influence that is quite unnecessary," said Patrick Omondi of Kenya's delegation. "That is not very good for species that are affected by trade."

Masanori Miyahara, chief counselor of the Fisheries Agency of Japan, acknowledged that Japanese government funds were used by nations to attend CITES and other fisheries conferences.

"Participation is very important for them to learn what is going on internationally," he said. "They use the money for tuna regional fisheries management meeting and other meetings."

But Miyahara denied his government "was buying votes" with such funding or bluefin tuna at its reception.

"We wanted to show what it is," Miyahara said of the tuna sushi. "You can't buy the vote by just serving bluefin tuna. That's a silly idea."

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