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Opinion and Commentary

Bluefin tuna, highly prized for sushi and sashimi, is one of the most lucrative fisheries in the world, with single fish sold for upwards of \$40,000 in wholesale markets. Unfortunately, sushi's growing popularity, an increased number of fishing vessels and improved fishing technology mean the world is consuming more bluefin than the seas are producing.

The implications are obvious. In the short term, basic economics commands that higher demand and lower supply will either drive more fishermen into the business, drive prices up, or both. In the long term, basic biology dictates that the population will not survive.

Bluefin is an interesting species in that it is highly migratory. Two separate stocks of bluefin, one spawning in the Gulf of Mexico and one in the Mediterranean sea, travel long distances and eventually intermix. Effectively managing migratory species requires strong international commitment to the common goal of preserving the species.

Under President George W. Bush's leadership, the United States has aggressively tackled the broad issue of overfishing, domestically and internationally. We are committed to end overfishing of all domestic fisheries stocks by 2010, and we have set strong quotas for catching bluefin tuna in U.S. waters as part of an international agreement. However, domestic efforts to conserve bluefin tuna are not enough. As a sign of the decline of Atlantic and Mediterranean stocks of bluefin tuna, American fishermen have caught barely more than 10 percent of their allotted quota.

Meanwhile, European and other Mediterranean fishermen continue to ignore their quotas, at best, and blatantly overfish bluefin, at worst. For the last four years, fishing for bluefin in the Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic has exceeded the internationally negotiated quotas by at least 50 percent a year.

Because of the migratory nature of bluefin tuna, overfishing in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean is believed to be affecting U.S. stocks and fishermen. Ultimately, it may lead to the complete collapse for the fishery.

The unwillingness of nations in the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, or ICCAT, to reduce bluefin tuna fishing to sustainable levels and properly monitor their fisheries led the Bush administration to call for a temporary ban on fishing eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin. The temporary ban would have allowed the depleted stock to begin to recover. It also would have given time to adopt strong, enforceable monitoring and control measures.

Several nations publicly agreed that uncontrolled fishing of bluefin in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean is hurting all nations and damaging the credibility of the ICCAT, the

international body responsible for managing the species. Ultimately, however, when ICCAT met recently the majority of nations chose the status quo instead of bold action.

These nations said they wanted more time to see if the current management plan would work, firmly defending a 2006 plan that allows double the level of fishing that scientists recommend to stop the decline of the stock and prevent collapse of the fishery.

ICCAT adopted a proposal by Japan requesting nations fishing on eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin to report on their compliance with the 2006 fishing plan before next year's annual ICCAT meeting, when scientists will present results of the latest stock assessment. The United States believes it is too modest in light of the impending crisis.

International cooperation to rebuild fish stocks has worked in the past. The members of ICCAT succeeded in rebuilding North Atlantic swordfish by agreeing to reduce the catch levels. The United States also closed some fishing grounds to protect young fish and allow them to reach breeding age. Nations on both sides of the Atlantic focused the necessary attention on swordfish and restored the stock so that it can be harvested now by many nations at a sustainable level.

The nations of ICCAT had a historic chance to make bluefin tuna a symbol of international cooperation and environmental success. But after all the talk, the international body failed to live up to its founding mission. The United States had the path to sustainability on the hook, but the nations that fish in the Atlantic and Mediterranean failed to reel it in. If bold action is not taken soon, a few years from now we'll remember the revered bluefin as the one that got away.

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