

Bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean

The eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna was long a symbol of overfishing and fisheries mismanagement. Over the past decade, the stock has recovered, following the rebuilding measures introduced by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). The European Union is now transposing the ICCAT recommendation to move from the recovery measures to a bluefin tuna management plan.

Background

Atlantic bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*) is a highly migratory pelagic fish of impressive size (up to 3.3 m and 725 kg), with a lifespan of around 40 years. For management purposes, two stocks are considered (eastern and western), conventionally separated by the 45°W meridian. The eastern bluefin tuna stock, much larger than the western one, covers a wide distribution area in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean. It migrates every year over long distances between its spawning sites in the Mediterranean and its feeding grounds located in the eastern Atlantic, from the Norwegian Sea to west Africa.

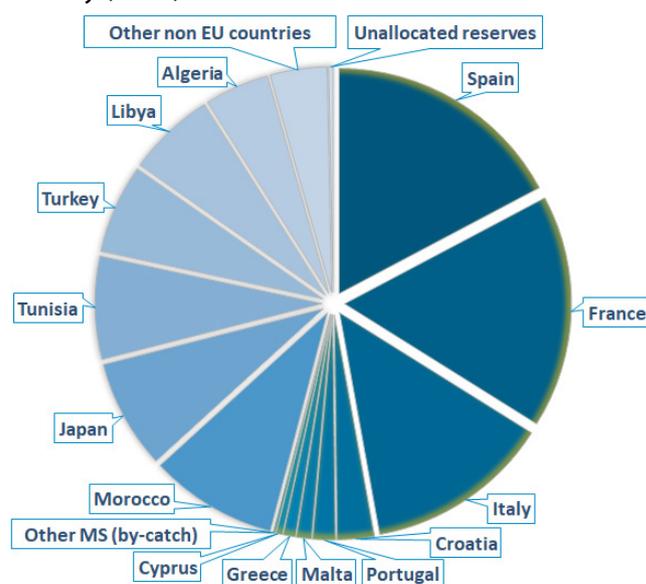
The eastern bluefin migration has supported valuable fisheries in the Mediterranean since antiquity. Initially based on hand lines and beach seines, these fisheries were dominated after the 16th century by tuna traps – a labyrinth of passive nets placed in the path of migrating tuna. After the expansion of purse seines and longlines in the Atlantic (in the 1950s) and in the Mediterranean (in the 1970s), the importance of tuna traps has gradually decreased, but some traditional traps are still in use in the western Mediterranean. A pole and line fishery using live bait (known as bait-boat) was introduced in 1948. The current EU quotas for eastern bluefin tuna account for more than half of the total catch. The main EU fishing countries are Spain, France and Italy, and to a lesser extent, Croatia, Portugal, Malta, Greece and Cyprus (see Figure 1).

The bluefin tuna fisheries have changed greatly with the rise of the Japanese sushi and sashimi market in the 1980s, which led to high demand. The value of the bluefin increased sharply, and with it fishing capacity and efficiency. The development of caging systems for fattening captured tuna, to fetch higher prices on the Japanese market, has also increased pressure on the wild stock. This evolution led to an upsurge in catches in the early 1990s (see Figure 2), and ultimately to critical overexploitation of the stock.

Fisheries management

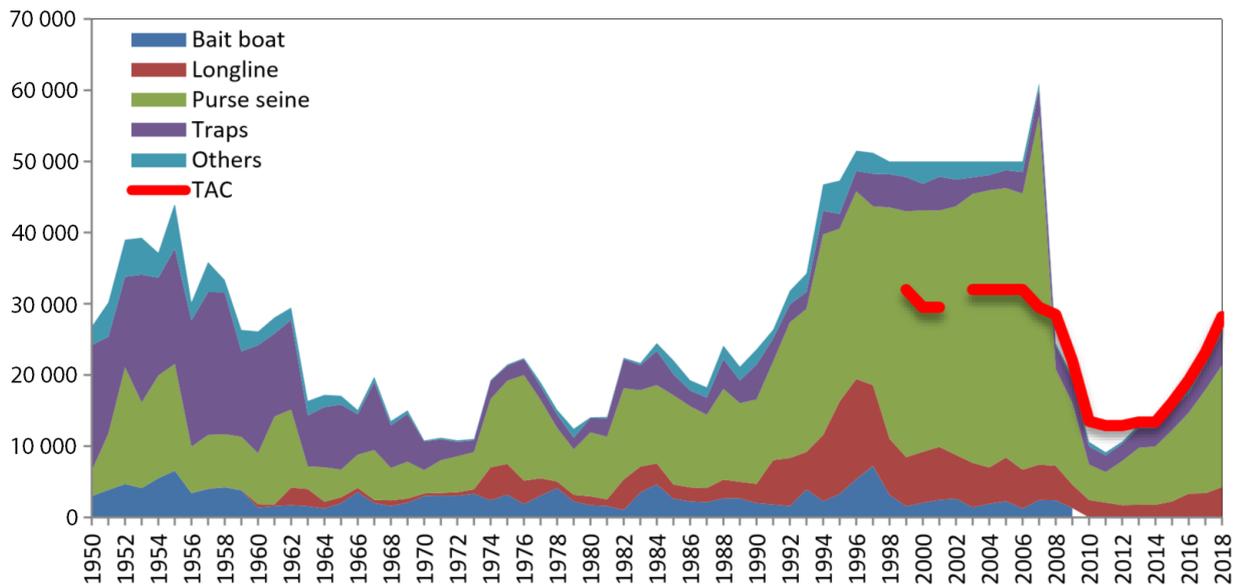
Like all tunas in the Atlantic, the eastern bluefin tuna stock is managed by [ICCAT](#), an intergovernmental fishery organisation established in 1966. The scientific committee of ICCAT has raised concerns about the state of the eastern bluefin tuna since the early 1990s. In 1996, ICCAT estimated that the stock was overfished, and in 1998, it introduced a system of total allowable catches (TAC). However, the TACs established by ICCAT regularly exceeded the advice of its scientific committee, and the control system in place did not ensure compliance with the catch limits. Moreover, the scientific committee [estimated](#) that the catches were seriously under-reported and actually reached 50 000 to 61 000 tonnes per year over the period 1996-2007 (for TACs of 30 000-32 000 tonnes; see Figure 2).

Figure 1 – Eastern bluefin tuna fishing quotas by country (2020)



Data source: ICCAT Recommendation [18-02](#), EU Regulation [2020/123](#).

Figure 2 – Eastern bluefin tuna catches by fishing gear (1950-2018) and TACs (1998-2018), in tonnes.



Source: ICCAT Scientific committee ([SCRS 2019](#)).

Following the scientific committee's warnings on a possible stock collapse and increasing public concern, ICCAT adopted in 2006 a bluefin tuna recovery plan for 2007-2022 (Recommendation [06-05](#)). It introduced restrictive measures, such as shortening the fishing season and protecting juvenile fish by increasing the minimum fishing size. The recovery plan was gradually reinforced in the following years. In particular, ICCAT agreed on a significant decrease in the TACs, which after 2010 reached the level of the scientific advice. Fishing capacity (i.e. the number of vessels) was drastically cut to match the lower TACs. Most importantly, the control system was strengthened. As a result of the recovery measures, the total catches of bluefin tuna sharply decreased from around 50 000 tonnes over the previous decade to 11-12 000 tonnes (see Figure 2).

Subsequent stock assessments in 2012-2014 displayed positive trends, and perception of the state of the bluefin tuna stock greatly improved. In 2014, following scientific advice, ICCAT endorsed a 20 % annual TAC increase for the next three years. In 2017, the scientific committee recommended a progressive increase of the TAC up to 36 000 tonnes in 2020. It also showed that the state of the stock no longer appears to require the emergency measures of the recovery plan. Accordingly, in 2018, ICCAT moved from the recovery plan to a management plan (Recommendation [18-02](#)), which entered into force in June 2019.

European Commission proposal and next steps

The European Union has been an ICCAT contracting party since 1997 and must therefore implement ICCAT recommendations into EU law. On 28 November 2019, the Commission put forward a [proposal](#) for the transposition of the ICCAT management plan, which would repeal Regulation [2016/1627](#) implementing the recovery plan. To reflect the higher TACs available, the proposal increases the fishing capacity by up to 20 % for purse seiners and new sectoral quotas for small-scale vessels, and for bait-boats in the Azores, Madeira and the Canaries. It prolongs the fishing season for purse seiners by seven days (to cover the 26 May-1 July period). The level of authorised by-catches increases from 5 % to 20 % of the total catches. As regards tuna farming facilities, the proposal allows an increase of the farming capacity, but also reinforces monitoring and control at farms. Some of these provisions, concerning the increased fishing and farming capacity, by-catches and the fishing seasons, already apply in EU waters. They were implemented by Regulation [2019/833](#), which amended Regulation 2016/1627 (the recovery plan) at the request of the Member States, with a view to ensuring a level playing field with other countries' fishing fleets after the entry into force of the ICCAT management plan in June 2019. The new proposal would also empower the Commission to adopt delegated acts for implementing future ICCAT recommendations amending the management plan. Within the European Parliament, the Committee on Fisheries (PECH) is currently examining the proposal, with Giuseppe Ferrandino (S&D, Italy) as rapporteur (procedure [2019/0272\(COD\)](#)).

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