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64 Courtland Drive
Narragansett, RI 02882
401-789-7596
fishearlybird@cox.net

PARISIAN TUNA FOLLIES

by

Dave Preble

Dave Preble, retired from fishing, is a member of the New England Fishery Management Council and a U.S. Commissioner to the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization. He was a member of the U.S. delegation to the annual meeting of the 48-nation International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, recently held in Paris, France.

In my mind's eye it is a morning in June and I can still see the grand fish, untold thousands of them, each as large as a draft horse, rolling along on the surface of the sea like a vast army of heavy cavalry. I am on the deck of a fishing boat south of Block Island, and I climb high into the rigging to once again bear witness to the beginning of the annual migration of giant Atlantic bluefin tuna into the waters of New England. And I know that for the next several months the "horse mackerel", as the old-timers called them, will be found all along the coast, from Long Island to Canada, from the beaches and sounds and bays to the thirty fathom line. My Rhode Island waters will be filled with them, from Westerly into Narragansett Bay, all around Block Island, and eastward across Cox Ledge. The village of Galilee, on Point Judith, will call itself "The Tuna Capital of the World", though there will be other towns along the Atlantic coast who will also claim the title.

Behind the giant fish will come hordes of smaller bluefin, juveniles of all ages, from near-giants down to the size of a bluefish. Throughout high summer and into autumn small boats will slow troll for them from just outside Block Island's Old Harbor to the southeast for five or six miles, returning with fish boxes filled. I remember ancient cedar plugs and small feathered jigs, the method no different from generations before mine, but for our rods and reels replacing their handlines and our small marine diesels replacing their sails, our freezers to store the meat replacing their glass "cans", though I once found an old Block Island tuna canning recipe and used it until the fish disappeared.

The memory begins more than a half-century ago and ends with the coming of west-coast tuna seiners in the sixties, ships sent to scoop up our juvenile bluefin tuna by the thousands of tons to feed the canneries. Then, in the seventies, a surge in the price paid for the giant fish changed their target from the declining juvenile population to the adult breeders, and added hundreds of new harpooners and hook fishermen. A trained biologist couldn't have devised a more effective way to destroy a resource. Soon the

bluefin tuna were mostly gone from the nearshore waters of my youth and of the generations before me, their numbers collapsing across the waters of New England. And within a decade they were rarely landed in “The Tuna Capital of the World”.

Decades have passed since the destruction of the bluefin tuna in the western North Atlantic, the waters we fished. During that time our knowledge of marine biology has steadily advanced and modern fishery management has grown to a fitful adolescence. We have come to understand that large issues affecting the lives of many people are decided by politics and that, when the issues cross international boundaries, the politics must be carried out in an international arena. The twentieth century taught us the horrible reality of Clauswitz’s lesson that the alternative to politics is the fires of war. Now, as I approach the end of my seventh decade on the planet, I have seen plenty of both, and though I have found the politics to be a complex, nasty, and exhausting business, it is infinitely preferable to the alternative.

The international arena for carrying out the politics of conserving and harvesting bluefin tuna, as well as many other open ocean fish of the Atlantic that cross national boundaries, is the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas, also known by its acronym ICCAT. The original Convention to form ICCAT was signed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, and went into effect in 1969. Headquartered in Madrid, Spain, and sanctioned by the United Nations, ICCAT now has 48 member nations and manages, with mixed results, nearly thirty species of tunas, swordfish, billfish, and sharks.

ICCAT has two related but very different functions. One is its science function, carried out by the permanent Standing Committee on Science and Statistics (SCRS), and the other is its management function, carried out by the Commission of contracting nations. The scientists of the SCRS compile fisheries statistics, coordinate research and stock assessments, and provide generally high-quality science-based management advice to the Commission. Each November the Commission has an annual meeting of the delegations from all its member nations, providing a forum of plenary and bilateral interactions within which agreements may be reached, both on broad measures for conservation of fish stocks and on national allocations for their sustainable harvest. The goal is for these agreements, arrived at over ten days of grueling, round-the-clock negotiations, to result in consensus on all issues before the final open plenary meetings. This political process is influenced by year-round lobbying from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) representing a variety of viewpoints. Qualified NGOs are granted non-participatory observer status at the annual meeting and have representatives on many delegations, including that of the U.S. The final consensus of the ICCAT Commission is a function of the negotiating skills and political experience of each nation’s delegation. No delegation ever gets all it seeks.

Until very recently, ICCAT did poorly with bluefin tuna management. SCRS recommendations were routinely ignored as member nations jockeyed for higher and yet higher allocations of this high-value species, while catch statistics were routinely falsified and illegal fishing was rampant and mostly uncontrolled. Actual total annual catches, particularly in the Mediterranean, rose to a level several times higher than could possibly be sustained. Stock collapse across the range of the Atlantic bluefin tuna appeared imminent, and there was little impetus within ICCAT for change. It seemed as if major fishing nations had accepted liquidation of the bluefin tuna resource as inevitable and had

decided to grab all they could before the end, and the environmental NGOs were unable to apply sufficient leverage to keep it from happening.

But a tipping point was reached, and change finally came through a series of events both fortuitous and unexpected. The first was the release, in September 2008, of a UN-required performance report on ICCAT. In unusually stark and candid terms, the report stated that ICCAT management of bluefin tuna "...is widely regarded as an international disgrace..." Shortly thereafter, Monaco petitioned the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) for an Appendix 1 listing of bluefin tuna, a move that would have constrained international trade in the species. Although the petition failed to pass, several dissenting nations stated that their negative vote was temporary and only given to allow ICCAT enough time to clean up its act. The international media and reinvigorated environmental NGOs pounced on the opportunity to aggressively focus public outrage worldwide. Practically overnight it had become politically impossible to continue the rapacious mismanagement of bluefin tuna. At its 2009 annual meeting, ICCAT took unplanned and unprecedented emergency action, cutting the total allowed catch by half and tightening compliance and enforcement measures. All eyes then turned to November 2010, and the meeting to be held in Paris, France. Bluefin tuna would be the star agenda item, and there would be a new stock assessment along with updated SCRS scientific advice. All sides, from those wanting a complete moratorium to those wanting to restore high quotas, prepared to do battle.

And so the meeting began, full of sound and fury. But two weeks of late nights and constant conflict produced little change from the prior year's emergency measures, and pleased almost no one. The total allowed catch of bluefin tuna over the next two years was reduced 4% in the Mediterranean and 3% in the western Atlantic. Most of the NGOs, from both environmental and commercial fishing interests, were furious. It reminded me of a remark by Ed Myers in his book *Turnaround*. "Nobody really knows who won, which is a standard condition of any fisheries negotiation: if both sides are angry, then it was successful." By this standard, ICCAT 2010 decisions on bluefin tuna management were surely successful.

But were they successful for the future of the Atlantic bluefin tuna? Were they successful for the interests of the United States? It would be impossible to determine the answers to these questions based upon the follow-up media releases from most of the NGOs. And herein lies my biggest disappointment in the wake of Paris. Political negotiation is an art, but successful outcomes are the result of following benchmark rules and techniques that can be learned. The first rule is that politicians and negotiators must have accurate facts at their fingertips all of the time, because successful arguments are based upon a core of fact. This is especially true in the internet age when a factual lie is quickly exposed and the negotiating position weakened and lost. Researching and discovering the facts behind any issue is the job of professional support staff. But politicians also rely upon lobbyists, mostly from NGOs, to help develop arguments based upon slanting, spinning, or interpreting facts in the light of specific political goals. In other words, successful lobbying is also based upon a core of fact, and political decision makers quickly learn which NGOs argue from true facts, and which ones do not. The latter are soon ignored and become irrelevant.

Fisheries politics is both technical and contentious, and lobbying by NGOs is important to successful outcomes. This has clearly been the case in New England. But in

Paris 2010, most NGOs performed poorly, from environmental groups who engaged in buffoonery and misrepresented the science to industry groups who were mendacious and also misrepresented the science. With both groups dishonesty was counterproductive to achieving their goals, and their positions lost relevance in the larger negotiations among national delegations. The follies continued after the Paris meeting had ended, with many NGO media releases so distorted and untrue that the chairman of the U.S. delegation wrote, “reading the releases it is hard for me to believe they were all at the same meeting”. Most distressing were statements that lied about facts to feed a series of ad hominem political attacks on officials of the current administration. Our toxic domestic political climate was interjected into international negotiations and the negative effects will long outlast current domestic politics.

Fortunately ICCAT mostly did the right things this year. But the American people were poorly served by the very groups who should represent their varied interests. It is not the job of fisheries NGOs to attack the process, it is their job to present their positions truthfully and to win their arguments. Illogical distortions, lies, and personal attacks do not win, neither during negotiations nor in later public comments and media releases. In the end, the measure of our success will not be the political enemies we destroy to serve a mythic ideology of our past, but the coalitions we build to accomplish a larger goal for our future. For the bluefin tuna, that goal should be a healthy and sustainable resource in a healthy and living ocean. We can have substantial and valuable commercial tuna harvests while making certain that our grandchildren and their grandchildren will be forever able to greet the grand northward swimming bluefin tuna every spring of their lives. We can do it if we have the will and the political skill, but we are not there yet.