

# TUNA AND THE JAPANESE

*In Search of a Sustainable Ecosystem*

**Takeaki Hori**

**JETRO**

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Japan External Trade Organization

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## Acknowledgments

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## Preface

Over the past 30 years, the Japanese longline tuna fishing industry has been undergoing a painstaking transformation in response to several constraints on its traditional modes of operation. It is clear that the dominant constraint was the loss of potential fishing grounds through the declaration of 200 nautical-mile economic zones. Anthony Bergin and Marcus Howard note that "longer voyages caused by restricted access to fishing grounds and restrictions on catches of certain species have increased economic pressures on Japanese distant-water operations." (*Marine Policy*, May 1992)

Indeed, the postwar history of the Japanese offshore longline tuna fishing industry has been the hollowing-out process of the industry. The boat owners made every possible effort to increase the efficiency of their operations, increasing the size of vessels equipped with high technology and reducing the total number of vessels. In order to facilitate the modernization and management of fishing operations, the Japanese government offered long-term packages of financial assistance at low interest. Nevertheless the Japanese tuna fishing industry is declining as it struggles to cope with a series of problems related to the environment – problems such as depletion of bait fish, and tuna overfishing. At the same time, radical environmentalists are threatening, as their ultimate goal, to call for the complete prohibition of tuna fishing in general or the bluefin tuna in particular, unless policies designed to protect marine mammals and endangered species are put into effect and regulated internationally and domestically.

Scientific research is under way, but there are as yet no firm findings about catch levels or techniques that might ensure the future working together of the fishing industry and the environmental conservation movement. I am now deeply interested in the future of the tuna industry. I am convinced that an effort to solve the internationally politicized tuna issue can play a leading role in the effort to achieve economic development while protecting the ecosystem.

Food from the sea is critically important for mankind. Fish supplies more than 40 percent of our animal protein. If we were forced to replace fish with other forms of land animal or grain protein, the world ecosystem would suffer devastating consequences.

This book is not a scholarly work to be read by a few specialists. I hope it will be taken as an invitation to all of us to think about how we can go about living in harmony with the sea. My wish is to contribute to a deeper understanding of issues of common interest to global citizens.

October 1996

Takeaki Hori

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## INTRODUCTION

### **A Growing Appetite for a Diminishing Supply**

One of the most confusing things at international conferences is the widespread use of abbreviated names of agencies. It takes time to decipher the official names of the agencies and the nature of the organizations they refer to. Abbreviations like GATT, OECD, ESCAP, the UN and the EU, all of which have a long history, have now come into common use. Abbreviations like CITES, ICCAT and others are more like a code only known to a limited number.

If you are interested in the preservation of the global environment, you should know that CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) is an international agreement on trade in species of flora and fauna that are in danger of extinction.

Going further along the scale we have ICCAT (International Committee for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna), which deals with supervision of tuna resources. It became fairly well known at the eighth conference on treaty powers of the Washington Treaty, held in Kyoto in March 1992. It is officially described as "A treaty for international dealings in species of wild flora and fauna for which there is some fear of extinction."

Environmental groups, such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), have been highly critical of

Japan's seemingly endless appetite for tuna. They say Japan finances an international industry that fishes indiscriminately for high grade tuna to be used for sushi, under the pretext of "controlling tuna stocks."

Organizations like the WWF and others brought strong pressure to bear at the Kyoto conference, asserting that the fishing industries in Canada, Japan and the United States had sunk to using dummy organizations to deceive the world. They sarcastically suggested that ICCAT really stood for "International Committee to Catch All Tuna."

### Regulatory Waves Are Inevitable

The generally respected *Harper's Magazine* in June 1994 published an extensive article called "Death of a Giant; Stalking the Disappearing Bluefin Tuna," in which writer John Seabrook tagged along with two young American brothers hunting tuna off Booth Bay Harbor, Maine, hoping to sell the giants for around \$30,000 each on the Japanese market. The writer cites figures that bear out the title of his article, while the fishermen dispute them, claiming that the bluefin population is not declining or in danger of extinction. They normally take about 40 of the fish a season and ship them to Japan, where they are the most highly prized of seafood.

The following two paragraphs appeared in the Asahi Shimbun's weekly magazine *AERA* on March 17, 1992:

"In Japan, the bluefin tuna is known as *kuro maguro*, or black tuna. It is sometimes called *hon maguro*. In size and taste, this is the king of the tuna. Fully grown,

it is three meters from nose to tail. It can be close to 400 kilograms in weight. Its flesh is red and it makes the finest sushi and *sashimi*. It is also the most expensive tuna. At the Tsukiji fish markets in Tokyo in January it was priced at 3,304 yen per kilogram, frozen. It is in another class altogether compared with bigeye tuna at 1,160 yen and yellowfin tuna at 782 yen per kilogram. The total catch of bluefin around the whole world is about 30,000 tons, or about one percent of all tuna. Most are caught in the Mediterranean, followed by the Pacific and the Atlantic. They are caught by drift nets, round haul nets, longlines and dragnets, and in the United States, large catches are taken through fishing for sport.

Japan consumes about 16,000 tons of bluefin a year. Almost half of this is imported and the remainder is taken by Japanese fishing ships – about 7,000 tons in the Pacific and 1,000 tons in the Atlantic. Other countries can almost all of their tuna. Only in Japan is the demand for sushi so great.”

At the Tsukiji fish markets tuna is known as “the big stuff,” and the section of the markets that specializes in tuna is called the “big fish section.”

## **Ideological Implications**

The problem of diminishing tuna resources moved into the spotlight after the declaration of the 200-nautical-mile economic zone, which is sometimes seen as a move to fence in the resources of the sea, or a fence to keep out aggressive and successful fishermen. There is however a long history behind this situation.

In the arena of the campaign for the conservation

of nature, the tuna and the Pacific halibut have played crucial roles. Soon after the end of World War II, the small fish used as bait for tuna decreased markedly in the waters along the West Coast of the United States, generating complaints from those involved in the coastal fishing industry. People were reminded that the food chain in the oceans and protection of the global environment were closely related. This has indeed been proven in practice.

Adult yellowfin tuna, which inhabit the Pacific off the West Coast of North America in large numbers, live side by side with dolphins. In this situation, dolphins often get caught up in the nets with the tuna, a matter that is strongly condemned by environmental protection groups. It is officially acknowledged that an average of one dolphin is killed for each cast of a round haul net.

This controversy continued uninterrupted for a long time, and we had to wait until the 1970s for the matter to come into the spotlight on a global scale. The environmental protection groups settled on an absolute standard for large mammals such as whales and dolphins in the oceans. On occasion, they advocated total protection for these mammals as friends of the human race. With such an ideologically flavored campaign, it seemed inevitable that before long even the ordinary tuna would also be subject to fishing bans.

This obviously complex question requires a thorough examination. Unfortunately, however, fisheries resources have become a prime target, largely as an environmental symbol.

A campaign ostensibly focusing on a "symbiosis" between animals in the wild and humankind was highlighted at the meeting of the Diet to conclude the

Washington Treaty, held in Kyoto in March 1992, and again at the U.N. Environmental Development Conference held in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil in June.

It was timely to discuss this theme on a global scale, which is the way it must be seen, but when it got down to practical steps, conflicting philosophies and interests of the participating countries came to the fore. Many countries would not deal with basic questions. They were solely concerned about their particular interests. The bases of arguments on the fishing industry were quite diverse, even on practical matters. But the environmental groups that maintain whales possess intelligence similar to human beings, and therefore should be protected at all costs, also said that they would support a commercial fishing industry on a scale that could maintain protection for the species.

In this statement, there does seem to be a possibility for an over-arching agreement among all concerned parties, nations and industries, if a suitable model can be found.

### **Food Culture or War of Resources?**

The tuna fishing industry has been the focus of attention largely because it is an area in which it is quite easy to take sides politically.

Japan is a consumer of *sashimi* and tuna, so much so that one could safely say that it is the largest consumer, and what is more, it is also a producer of tuna. From the viewpoint of the Japanese consumer and especially the Japanese fishing industry, there are undoubtedly many issues that should be disputed. However, under

democratic rules, in an international forum that adheres to majority decisions, Japan cannot win on this matter, even though its own food culture is involved.

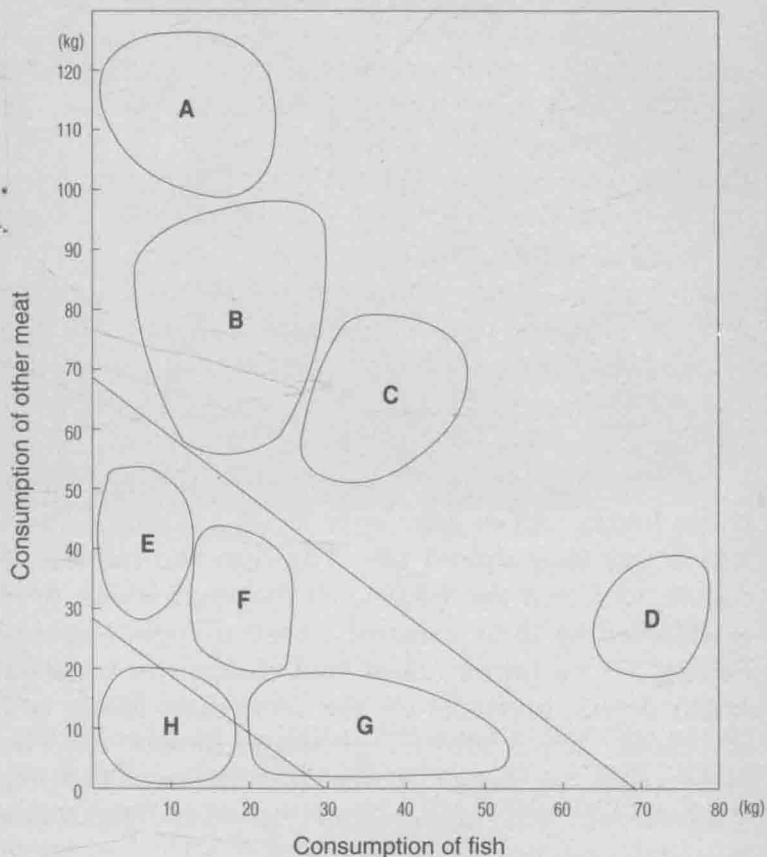
The regulations now under international consideration apply to the bluefin tuna inhabiting the North Atlantic, but it is pretty obvious that, before long, the regulatory waves could break against the other species of tuna. The swordfish, which is popular in sport fishing, is now almost entirely regulated.

Japan is greatly outnumbered and there is nothing that can be done. It may be inevitable that Japan's deep-sea tuna fisheries may soon come to an end, and with them the livelihoods of fishermen who have followed their fathers in pursuit of the tuna. In the process of achieving a harmonious solution, where should we draw the line, and how should we react?

The process of putting fisheries resources, including salmon, trout, crab and squid under international supervision was designed to fence in the countries with coastal fisheries resources, clearly represented by the major powers, the United States and the former Soviet Union. Of course, the lack of regulation in Japan's industry, which continued to make catches as if the fisheries resources belonged to nobody, was at the root of the problem.

If the logic of the past is applied to the tuna also, it will soon be subject to strict regulation. No matter if we point out that the Japanese method of fishing with longlines (using hooks) and the method used by European and U.S. fishermen – which takes everything in its path with seine nets – are different, no one seems to listen. Even though we emphasize the differences in our eating habits, that we rely on tuna for a great deal of protein in

## Consumption Rate of Fish and Other Meat per Capita



- Group A: USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina  
 B: France, UK, Netherlands, Italy, Germany, Poland, Greece, Slovakia  
 C: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Spain, Russia  
 D: Japan, Iceland  
 E: South Africa, Brazil, Columbia, Venezuela  
 F: Chile, Cuba, Peru  
 G: Philippines, R. Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand  
 H: China, India, Iran, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Mexico, Ecuador

Source: Compiled by Dr. Fukuzo Nagazaki, former president of Japan Cetacean Institute.



our diets, it is a matter of the greatest difficulty to get other countries to understand this.

I became involved in the international disputes over tuna more than twenty years ago. At that time, inexperienced though I was, by examining related industries I was able to foresee in rough outline the situation deep-sea fishing finds itself in today, but few would listen to me then. Only a handful of young operators of deep sea tuna boats took me seriously. But when the Oil Crises of the mid-1970s hit, and with fishing operations deteriorating day by day, they listened to what I said, although I was hardly more than a student, and decided we should promote international cooperation and proper supervision of tuna resources.

In other words, they decided to hedge their risks in the future. All of them were facing a dilemma about which way they should go. The first choice was, of course, to follow the traditional footsteps which were established by their ancestors, even though deep-sea fishing has no future. A second choice was to adopt rather drastic measures for the immediate future as I advocated. It was something the government and The Federation of Japan Tuna and Bonito Fishing Cooperatives (Nikkatsuren) should have done. But it was beyond their ability.

As a compromise, this small group set up a limited company. They told me, "We are buying a dream." When I was living in Sydney, I received a message that they were about to set up a tuna fishing company to back up my dream. They wanted me to come back to Japan for a while.

They used my name and called the company "Hori Gumi" (The Hori Group). Although flattered by