

# PLANET FOOD

August 2002

TUNA

## *Did you know?*

*Many people buy tuna because it is an oily fish, rich in Omega 3 but this health benefit is largely destroyed in the canning process!*

## 1. EDITORIAL

I think that there is a world of difference, in taste, between tinned tuna and fresh. By all accounts I am not alone. Demand for fresh tuna has increased far more rapidly than demand for tinned tuna, although tinned, of course, still takes up the lion's share of the market. Interestingly, as the availability of fresh tuna has decreased, the price has gone through the roof – up nearly 15 times between 1999 and 2001!

Most people don't think of the plight of the tuna, when they buy a fresh tuna steak, sling a tin of tuna into their supermarket trolley or include it in a lunch-time snack. But stocks of most varieties are threatened by over-fishing. Although tuna is a healthy fish to eat because it has high levels of Omega 3 (see box above), the **Food Standards Agency** has recently issued advice about limiting the amount we eat – along with swordfish – because of concerns over mercury contamination.

One of the most successful consumer campaigns has been to promote 'dolphin-friendly' tuna. This month, I will be looking at what is currently happening with this issue, as well as over-fishing of tuna and how a London sushi bar owner might be helping the Japanese source fish more responsibly.

## 2. THE TROUBLE WITH TUNA

### Six tuna species

Tuna is the most commercially important fish species in the world and consumption is rising fast. The six commercially important tuna species are as follows:

*Albacore:* Found off the Portuguese and Spanish coast, moving northwards through the Bay of Biscay to southern Ireland during the summer. This tuna has lighter meat than yellowfin. They are often canned because their flesh turns an unappetising brown when in contact with air.

*Bigeye:* Found in the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans, there is concern for Bigeye tuna populations, particularly since it is being seen as a replacement for bluefin.

*Northern bluefin:* Even though this species of tuna is very endangered, it can still be found for sale in the UK.

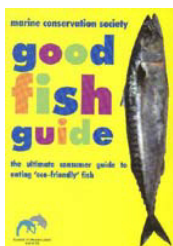
*Southern bluefin:* These are the most endangered tuna, assessed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as 'Critically Endangered' (see below).

*Skipjack:* A tropical tuna with light-coloured meat, it is the most commonly tinned tuna.

*Yellowfin:* Populations of Atlantic yellowfin tuna are believed to have declined by nearly a third in the past 10 years. Nearly 35% of all tuna caught are yellowfin and they are the main species that tend to swim with dolphins (see dolphin-friendly tuna below).

## **Campaigning on tuna**

The *Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)*, has been set up to promote fish from well managed fisheries. If the fish meet their criteria, they can be labelled with an MSC logo. Ultimately it should be possible for supermarkets or other retailers to only sell fish with the MSC logo. But the MSC have a particular problem with tuna. It is a migratory species, which means that it is difficult to identify who is responsible for its management. So the MSC are recruiting someone, sponsored by Sainsburys, on a three year project, to research all the issues to do with tuna and to develop criteria by which they would be eligible for an MSC label.



The *Marine Conservation Society (MCS)* have also highlighted concerns over tuna. Their 'Good Fish Guide', gives information on all commonly eaten fish species in the UK, in relation to how endangered they are, what fishing methods are used and what consumers can do about it. They say that stocks of tuna are fully exploited with many over-fished and recommend that people wishing to eat tuna should restrict themselves to skipjack or yellowfin, preferably caught by pole and line.

## **Dolphin-friendly**

One high-profile issue for tuna fishing has been the large-scale killing of dolphins and other marine mammals. The dolphins are actually targeted by fishermen as they swim alongside yellowfin tuna. Millions of them have been caught in purse seine nets, killed and thrown back into the sea. Mexico, Venezuela and Colombia are still doing this. The tuna they catch are largely sold to their domestic market or to other countries in Latin America, although they do sometimes try and sneak it into other countries.

The *Earth Island Institute* based in the US have been very effective in campaigning on the plight of the dolphins. They not only police exports of what they call 'dolphin-deadly' tuna to stop it happening, but they have also developed a 'dolphin-safe' labelling scheme, which is now widely recognised. Unfortunately, the term 'dolphin-friendly', which is well recognised in the UK, has been abused, particularly in Latin American, with much of this being 'anything but friendly to dolphins' according to Earth Island. Towards the end of 2002 or early in 2003 a new standardised 'dolphin-safe' logo will be introduced into the UK, to replace individual competing schemes. <INSERT LOGO>

Unfortunately, 'dolphin-friendly' fishing isn't quite as simple as it sounds. Whatever alternative is used has its problems. And the *Earth Island Institute* are concerned that the Mexicans are spreading misleading information about the impacts of the more 'dolphin-friendly' fishing methods, because they do not want to change practices.

It is possible to reduce the risk to dolphins and still use purse seine nets. In recent years, dolphin deaths in the Eastern Pacific Ocean have been dramatically reduced by tight regulations on the fisheries. Long-lines and traditional pole and line methods are also used. But these alternatives are not without their problems.

Greenpeace describes long-line fishing as follows: *'Imagine, not human strength straining against mammoth fish, but a highly mechanised 24-hour fishing fleet that lays out enormous amounts of fishing line in 100 kilometre lengths, each carrying up to 3000 baited hooks.'* Unfortunately these lines not only catch tuna – perhaps even more juveniles than are caught in nets - but sharks, albatross, turtles and other unintended prey. Even pole and line fisheries catch dolphins which are usually released alive by cutting the line but leaving the hook inside the dolphin.

The way forward, suggests the *Earth Island Institute* is to:

1. Reduce the tuna fleet capacity
2. Close some areas for tuna fishing completely and others at particular times of year
3. Introduce fishing technologies that mean tuna can be caught without a bycatch of dolphins and other species.

Unfortunately, they do not believe there is the will to do this.

Another suggestion from an American campaigning organisation is that all tuna should be fished with baitboats. This is commonly used for canned tuna. Bait is thrown into the water to attract the tuna, which are then caught on hooks, thrown over when they arrive to feed. There is relatively little by-catch with this method.

The *Whale and Dolphin Conservation Society* is concerned about albacore tuna fishing. Although driftnet fishing for albacore was banned in the EU from the beginning of 2002 because of the large numbers of dolphins killed, they say that the alternatives could be even more damaging.

### **The Southern Blue Fin tuna**

*'Living up to 40 years, weighing as much as 200 kilos and measuring two metres in length, the Southern bluefin tuna is not only a magnificent creature of the deep, but a critical part of the marine ecosystem.'*

*Greenpeace website*

Southern bluefin tuna are on the verge of collapse – they are hugely endangered. The main market for this exorbitantly priced tuna – over \$100 (Australian dollars) a kilo or \$60,000 for a fish – is for sashimi in Japan. And these sky-high prices in Tokyo have precipitated a 'gold-rush' – fishermen actually use spotter planes to find the tuna and may take two weeks to track down a single fish.

Massive over-fishing in the 1960s and 1970s outstripped the Southern Bluefin tuna's ability to naturally replace itself and maintain healthy population levels. And predictions for the

future look bleak, as licenses for boats fishing for this species have actually increased over the last decade.

Another threat to the bluefin is tuna aquaculture. In Port Lincoln, Southern Australia, young tuna, under six months old, are caught on route to their Southern Ocean feeding grounds, in purse seine nets. They are then towed back to port and - if they survive - held in large circular holding nets and fattened up for sale. Unfortunately this all happens before they have a chance to breed.

### **3. SUSHI WITH NO TUNA? Interview with Caroline Bennet from Moshi Moshi sushi bars**

In 1994 Moshi Moshi became the first conveyor belt sushi bar to open in Britain. Owner, Caroline Bennet, says that when it started there was not much demand but now it is very popular. But this, of course means a rise in demand for fish.

At the beginning there was no problem with fish supplies but then Caroline noticed that tuna was not always available. She started berating suppliers and then decided to investigate. What she discovered turned Caroline into an activist on fish conservation issues. For example, she found out that stocks of Western and Southern Blue Fin tuna have fallen by 95% since the 1950s. And the annual quota for Bluefin fishing represents over 25% of total world Bluefin fish stocks (40,000 tonnes) . More than half of this is allocated to the Japanese and they are pushing to increase it.

Moshi Moshi have taken all Bluefin tuna off the menu altogether and only offer Yellowfin. They are thinking of taking all tuna off the menu. Caroline says that this may not be popular with customers – tuna is an integral part of sushi – but she feels that if people are given information on the issue, they will sympathise.

But Caroline is not stopping there. She recognises that the Japanese are the biggest fish eaters in the world and she is going there to encourage restaurants to raise consumer awareness about these issues. She plans to take a friendly approach and not be too confrontational but thinks that fish eaters are often well educated and will be keen to play a part in preserving fish stocks.

#### **MOSHI MOSHI'S STANCE ON TUNA**

It was actually hearing about the plight of tuna that led us towards the environmental stance we are adopting today. Owing to the precipitous decline in numbers of bluefin tuna in our seas, Moshi Moshi has now stopped serving it in our restaurants. We currently serve yellowfin. However, even though yellowfin exist in comparatively larger numbers and are not experiencing the same pressures as bluefin tuna, we are greatly concerned by the overall situation and are closely monitoring the status of this species with a mind to making further changes, if necessary in the future.

### **4. WHAT YOU CAN DO.....**

#### **1. Reduce your consumption of tuna.**

2. Choose Skipjack or Yellowfin if you must eat tuna and make sure that the Earth Island Institute has endorsed it as ‘dolphin-safe’
2. Never buy Northern or Southern Blue fin tuna.
3. Buy tuna caught by traditional pole and line if you see it<sup>1</sup>.
4. Wherever you buy your fish, ask them about their policy on over-fishing.
5. Look out for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) label on fish, although this is not yet possible for tuna.
6. Support retailers and restaurants with responsible policies on fish.
7. Get a copy of ‘The Good Fish Guide’ to find out about all fish species.

## 5. TUNA CONTACTS

COMMISSION FOR CONSERVATION OF SOUTHERN BLUEFIN TUNA  
[www.ccsbt.org](http://www.ccsbt.org)

EARTH ISLAND INSTITUTE [www.earthisland.org](http://www.earthisland.org)

GREENPEACE [www.greenpeace.org](http://www.greenpeace.org)

INTER-AMERICAN TROPICAL TUNA COMMISSION (IATTC) [www.iattc.org](http://www.iattc.org)

INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF ATLANTIC TUNA (ICCAT) [www.iccat.es](http://www.iccat.es)

INTERNATIONAL UNION FOR THE CONSERVATION OF NATURE (IUCN)  
[www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)

MARINE CONSERVATION SOCIETY 01989 566017 [www.mcsuk.org](http://www.mcsuk.org)  
*Good Fish Guide- the ultimate consumer guide to eating ‘eco-friendly’ fish*, written by  
Bernadette Clarke.

MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL 020 7350 4000 [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org)

MOSHI MOSHI 020 7377 5005 [www.moshimoshi.co.uk](http://www.moshimoshi.co.uk)  
Caroline Bennett

WHALE AND DOLPHIN CONSERVATION SOCIETY 01249 449500 [www.wdcs.org](http://www.wdcs.org)

WORLD WIDE FUND FOR NATURE 01483 426 444 [www.wwf.org](http://www.wwf.org)

---

<sup>1</sup> This is tricky because the Earth Island Institute claim that they know of one UK tuna canner who labels their tuna as ‘caught on pole and line’, when it is actually caught in purse seine nets.