

Bluefin tuna has been fished to the brink of extinction

The EU must not let Malta destroy the king of fish

Frank Pope

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Two weeks ago a single bluefin tuna sold in Japan for a surreal £111,000. The price of this fish, which ends up in the best sushi restaurants, will carry on rocketing so long as the tuna population keeps plummeting.

The Mediterranean tuna industry, which has taken tens of millions of euros in subsidies, has fished the bluefin to the brink — stocks are within three years of total collapse.

Europe could ban trade in the bluefin — but the nationalistic fervour of one man, Joe Borg, the EU Fisheries Commissioner, is a huge obstacle. So why Mr Borg's opposition to a ban? Could it be that he is from Malta, where the economy earns €100 million a year from the bluefin?

Apparently it could. Commenting on his five-year tenure, he told *The Times of Malta* that “it is thanks to a lot of hard work at my level and at my staff’s level that many of the proposals that are agreed by the commission took into account Maltese sensitivities”.

The short-sightedness of helping an important industry to cause its own collapse is staggering. Stavros Dimas, the EU Environment Commissioner, who has been trying to point this out, hails from Greece, another nation with a tuna industry. Unfortunately for him — and the bluefin — once the Maltese have taken a position they don’t give it up.

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Time is almost up. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) meets in March to debate banning trade in the bluefin. Cites saved the African elephant from ivory poachers but to save the bluefin, Europe’s vote is key. The EU commissioners meet this morning, the last opportunity before the Cites gathering, but the bluefin is off the agenda. Jos? Manuel Barroso, the Commission President, doesn’t like arguments; the outcome of every other “college” meeting in the past five years has been agreed in advance by civil servants. Mr Barroso knows that with Mr Borg defending

Malta's interests, that record would soon be broken.

Nicolas Sarkozy could break the deadlock thanks to the scale of French fishing interests. He proudly announced support for the ban last year but French fishermen bullied him into a U-turn. This week he is expected to make his final call. The tuna may yet win – even though there aren't enough of them left to blockade the ports, as the French fleet is likely to do if they lose.

If President Sarkozy stands tall he could save the day. But if he caves in, the bluefin are in the hands of the 27 commissioners. At the end of their term in office, now is their chance to reach beyond short-term national interests to the future of the king of fish and those who live off it.

Frank Pope is ocean correspondent

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