



A Future for Atlantic Bluefin Tuna in the UK

Introduction

Over the last three years, huge Atlantic Bluefin Tuna have appeared late each summer in UK waters. A global stock recovery program has seen numbers recover sharply from danger levels ten years ago. From Cornwall and Wales to the Outer Hebrides, these unique fish are now present in unprecedented numbers. Dozens of fish up to 700lb have been hooked accidentally by anglers and safely released.

Until the 1950s the UK had a thriving, valuable recreational Bluefin Tuna fishery operating mainly out of Scarborough under the auspices of the Tunny Club. Commercial overfishing of both herring and tuna saw stocks collapse and British big game anglers currently have to resort to spending £1000s pursuing the Catch and Release of these magnificent fish overseas.

The UK now has an opportunity to make a unique response to the return of these iconic fish. The Government's post Brexit vision includes the ambition in its 25 Year Environment Plan for the UK to develop world-leading fisheries management. By adopting our forward thinking, live release fishery proposal, with an accompanying Scientific research program, we can put down a marker and potentially change the way other Nations view and manage their Atlantic Bluefin fisheries.

Background

By the end of the millennium Atlantic Bluefin stocks were collapsing due to decades of commercial overfishing. In 2007 the governing body for the management of Bluefin, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas - ICCAT - finally took action with a 15-year recovery program that slashed quotas and ramped up enforcement.

Given the precipitous decline in stocks into the early 2000's, in 2/2011 the International Union for the Conservation of Nature – IUCN - moved to rank Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Globally as 'endangered' in its 'Red list'. This is the midpoint of their three 'threatened status' rankings.

This 2011 'endangered' status is still cited by many organisations, Government bodies and media outlets despite two crucial developments since 2011.

1) Since 2011, there has been a substantial recovery in stocks. Every one of the population model's used by ICCAT's Research and Statistics Committee show a marked recovery in the years following the plan's full implementation. Some models suggest a more than doubling of the stock from 2007 to 2014, even to levels not seen since the 1960's. There IS uncertainty about the exact extent of the recovery, but that a notable recovery has occurred is not disputed by any serious science/conservation bodies.

2) In 2014, IUCN themselves conducted a Review of the European population of Atlantic Bluefin. That 'European' population actually comprises over 90% of the total population of Atlantic Bluefin. The conclusion of that report was to rank that population in January 2015 at 'Near Threatened', two notches below the 2011 Global 'endangered' status and outside the three 'threatened status' rankings.

Stocks have recovered, a fact acknowledged by such august bodies as the WWF and Pew Charitable Trust. Quotas were increased from 2014 and will rise to 38,350 tonnes by 2020, nearly three times the 'recovery' level of 2011.

There is no doubt that the Atlantic Bluefin recovery remains at risk from overly large quota increases, bad spawning years etc. However, the continued use of 'endangered' to describe their current status is inappropriate and misleading given the above developments.

A "Brexit opportunity"....

The EU is a member of ICCAT and for 2018 has a 16,000 tonne quota. All but 1-2 per cent of this is allocated to commercial interests predominantly in Spain, Italy and France.

ICCAT rules dictate that only member states with a quota may authorize sports or recreational fishing. In common with Ireland, Denmark and Sweden the UK has no share of this EU quota and is therefore unable to fish for them either commercially or recreationally

The UK's impending departure from the EU presents a great opportunity for us to join ICCAT as a sovereign member and request a quota in our own right.

We may not even need to request a share of the quota already allocated to other countries as a small 'reserve' quota is held by ICCAT to be allocated to new 'artisanal' fishery opportunities.

The UK government would have the discretion to allocate any quota how it sees fit, with regard to commercial and/or recreational interests. We strongly believe it's time to break the mould of outdated fisheries management approaches and allocate that quota exclusively to a live-release sports fishery.

We fully acknowledge the uncertainty remaining around the extent of the recovery in stocks, and the appropriateness of the most recent quota increases. That is precisely why we believe the time is right for the UK to lead the way and set a new benchmark for the sustainable, responsible management of Atlantic Bluefin. We can show there is another way, an alternative to the rapacious commercial exploitation of this iconic fish.

One factor in the uncertainty of Stock assessments frequently cited by scientists is the paucity of quality data from the fishery operators. This new UK fishery could, through a parallel research program including tagging of fish captured by anglers, contribute significantly to existing science based research aimed at increasing our knowledge of this incredible and highly mobile species. Use of the recreational angling sector to help execute such program is already taking place in Sweden and Denmark, including in those part funded by WWF.

The establishment of a tightly regulated live-release tuna fishery would provide a significant boost to local economies in Cornwall, West Wales, Northern Ireland and the North West of Scotland.

This presents a once in a generation opportunity to "do the right thing" and establish a sustainable, economically optimal, scientifically important fishery for Atlantic bluefin tuna, whilst at the same time guarding against moves to reinstate unsustainable commercial harvesting and the inevitable illegal fishing that would occur if no one was looking out for the stocks.

Bluefin Tuna - a great sporting opportunity

Atlantic bluefin tuna are an iconic sporting fish. Growing to over 1,500lb and with great strength, speed and stamina, they are one of the most sought after gamefish on the planet.

A substantial bluefin tuna live-release fishery exists in Canada, where studies show that the economic value of that Recreational element is **six times per tonne** that of a traditional commercial fishery.

The study in 2012 by the Ecology Action Centre estimated that recreational charter revenues alone created a value of \$100,000 per tonne versus the landed value from commercial fishermen of \$17,000. This was before additional revenue generation related to the charter industry was assessed, i.e. hotels, restaurants, fuel, bait, tackle etc.

Our Proposal

Rather than giving this valuable resource away at a knock down price to commercial interests, the establishment of a live-release recreational fishery represents the best way of ensuring a future that works best for the fish, the science, and the local communities.

We are proposing the introduction of a licensed fishery that would control the number of vessels deliberately targeting tuna along with a mandatory reporting and monitoring system. Controls on the tackle employed would help ensure the best fish welfare conditions in order to limit mortality, although this remains remarkably low at less than 5% as proven in numerous studies of existing fisheries and tagging programs.

This fishery would set a new benchmark in sustainable management of a recovering species. It would be one of the most highly regulated and controlled in the world, putting the interests of the fish at its heart and contributing to the government's ambition in its 25 Year Environment Plan for the UK to develop world leading fisheries management post-Brexit.

We envisage an accompanying scientific program of reporting, tagging, and DNA sampling that could contribute greatly to our further knowledge of Atlantic bluefin tuna stocks and the drivers for their renewed presence in the UK.

Although some may argue that it is too early in the recovery of the species to develop a new UK fishery these fish are here and are already being caught as bycatch. The option of doing nothing risks seeing the increase in illegal fishing and the involvement of criminal gangs as seen in numerous examples in Europe . Having responsible anglers as stakeholders in the bluefin tuna recovery can only be a good thing.

Our Campaign

Bluefin Tuna UK are a group of individuals, businesses and organisations who believe passionately that this iconic fish needs to be managed in a sustainable, economically optimal way. The Angling Trust is the national representative body for all forms of recreational fishing and is supporting the call for the re-establishment of a British recreational bluefin tuna fishery. We are building support amongst MPs and businesses who see the huge economic potential of re-establishing a Recreational UK Bluefin Tuna fishery.

Website and Facebook

Find us at www.bluefintuna.co.uk and on Facebook [Bluefin Tuna UK](#)