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EDITORIAL

Tuna's Death Spiral

The international commission that sets catch limits for tuna and other large migratory fish has failed, once again, to do what is necessary to give the prized bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean a real chance to survive. Meeting in Brazil last week, the commission approved an annual quota of 13,500 metric tons for 2010, well below the present quota of 22,000 tons but not the complete moratorium recommended by the commission's own scientists.

Scientists say that overharvesting has caused a 72 percent decline over 50 years among adult bluefin in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the fish's primary spawning grounds. The illegal catch sometimes equals the authorized quota. Most marine scientists believe the fishery should be shut down completely until the fish have reached sustainable levels.

The United States recommended what it hoped would be an acceptable interim compromise of 8,000 tons or lower. But American negotiators were outgunned by the Japanese — where bluefin tuna is the source of high-grade sushi — and by the European Union, whose politicians do pretty much what the big commercial fleets in France, Spain, Italy and other Mediterranean countries tell them to do and who apparently won't really start worrying until the last fish has been caught.

There is only one honorable course left for the United States. That is to join with Monaco and other countries that have proposed listing the bluefin as an endangered species under an international law known as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The law effectively bars commercial trade in any listed species, and has been helpful in protecting other animals like elephants and whales.

The next meeting of the 175 nations that subscribe to the convention will take place in March 2010 in Doha, Qatar. Earlier this year, the United States expressed support for Monaco's proposal and said it would change its mind only if the negotiations in Brazil established "responsible science-based quotas." They did not, and the United States should stick to its guns.

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