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NEWS

Bluefin tuna numbers dwindling

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DURHAM – Giant bluefin tuna fisheries in the Gulf of Maine are in danger of collapse, with the number of fish declining markedly in recent years, according to University of New Hampshire researchers.

Precisely why the numbers of bluefins are falling is unclear, but UNH researchers say it is likely the result of a number of factors, including over-fishing from European countries in the Eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea and shifts in migration and foraging patterns due to global warming.

Although the cause of the decline, both in the number and quality of fish, is uncertain, the effects are obvious.

In the mid-1990s, UNH scientists documented 500 to 900 schools of bluefin tuna in the Gulf of Maine averaging 100 to 150 fish each, said Molly Lutcavage, director of UNH's Large Pelagics Research Center. She said only a "few" schools would be seen in today's waters.

"The horrifying reality is that the huge decline in abundance happened so quickly," she said.

The toll is evident in the number of commercial tuna fishing permits, says Rich Ruais, executive director of the East Coast Tuna Association, who estimates that in the mid-1990s, there were 15,000 permits from Maine down to Texas, where today there are about 4,400.

As stocks of bluefin tuna continue to dwindle, many commercial fishermen have either stopped

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Mate Anthony Mendillo on the vessel

Cookie Too releases a giant bluefin tagged with a popup satellite tag. (MOLLY LUTCavage)

Atlantic bluefin tuna are known for being highly migratory, with spawning grounds in the Gulf of Mexico and the Mediterranean. The bluefins that come to New England waters, typically do so in June and stay as late as October foraging. But there is much mixing of stocks between the Eastern and Western Atlantic and much remains unknown about where the fish spend the rest of the year.

Tagging from UNH scientists has shown the fish travel long distances, often mixing with stocks in the Eastern Atlantic, Lutcavage said.

The Western Atlantic's bluefin quota is about 2,500 metric tons per year, while the Eastern's is more than 10 times that, with many fisherman pulling out even more fish than that, she said, hurting populations stateside.

Fish farms in Europe are flooding the market with tuna and keeping prices low for consumers worldwide even as stocks along America's coast continue to decline, Ruais said.

Another factor in pricing is the availability of other tuna species, which many sushi chefs will substitute to keep prices stable.

Bob Campbell, of Yankee Fisherman's Co-Op in Seabrook, said bluefin tuna are selling for an average of \$8 to \$9 per pound, significantly less than the \$20 per pound seen in the mid 1990s, even as supplies drop.

"In the heydays when things were going well, we would handle between 350 and 450 fish per season," Campbell said. "I think we handled maybe 60 fish last year, and so far this year we've handled 30."

Quality declining

Worse still, the quality of fish caught has declined, too.

Walter Golet, a graduate student at UNH's Large Pelagics Research Lab, analyzed Campbell's fishing logs from 1991 to 2004 and discovered that fish caught today are leaner and have a smaller fat content, making them less valuable.

Golet's research showed that a fish caught in September 1991 had only a 9 percent chance of being a C+ grade, with A being the highest. In contrast, a fish caught in September 2004 had a 76 percent chance of being a C+.

Some, like Campbell, hope the recent downturn is cyclical and that the fish will return, but

fishing them or been forced to diversify their fishing to make ends meet, Ruais said.

"In New England, if you're a commercial fisherman, to survive you have to be multi-species oriented," he said, noting that in the tuna-fishing prime of the 1980s and 1990s, many made a living fishing just tuna during the summer season.

East vs. West

With relatively low fishing quotas strictly enforced in the Western Atlantic, many are pointing to Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean fisherman for the decline in stocks.

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others aren't so sure.

Lutcavage said the best way to increase stocks in the Western Atlantic is to strictly enforce lower fishing quotas in the Eastern Atlantic, but European Union regulators have done little to reduce catches even as their scientists advise them otherwise.

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Ruais believes the best way to lower quotas across the Atlantic would be for the U.S. State Department to draw a hard line, which so far has not happened. Many believe that until that occurs, stocks will continue to decline.

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"The United States could solve this problem if the political will was there," he said.

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is this not typical we all suffer because the polititians take till its too late to decide "what is good for us " someone who counts beans and never seen the ocean is making decisions that effect alot of our lives ?go figure.

- **Mike, boston**

it isn't 'fish farming'- it is RAPE! we release every tuna ALIVE we catch on my sportfish boat 'BOSSII" ALIVE! i rememberwhen!

- **ed beren, east quogue ny**

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