



UK Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Too valuable to catch just once

They're here...

For the last three years, giant Atlantic bluefin tuna have appeared in substantial numbers in waters around the British Isles. From Cornwall, through the Celtic Deeps off South West Wales and throughout the Western Isles of Scotland, hundreds of sightings have been made.

Their presence in UK waters – a return after an absence since the early 1950s – presents a fantastic opportunity for the UK to set a new benchmark in the sustainable, economically optimal management of this valuable, vulnerable species.

The establishment of a live-release sport fishery would deliver a significantly greater economic return, per tonne, than that of a traditional commercial fishery, with the societal benefits spread across a wider cross section of coastal communities.

Such a fishery requires a very small quota that can be leveraged to provide a large number of charter fishing opportunities. It can also support broader, global scientific research into bluefin through parallel tagging and DNA sampling programs, as well as underpinning a sustainable, forward-thinking Atlantic bluefin tuna management plan.

Back from the brink

Only ten years ago Atlantic bluefin stocks were collapsing as decades of commercial overfishing for this hugely valuable fish finally took their toll. In 2011, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) changed the status of the stock on its 'Red List' to 'Endangered'.

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) took action in 2007 by implementing a 15-year recovery program that initially dramatically slashed quotas and ramped up enforcement.

In the years following the introduction of this program, stocks of Atlantic bluefin recovered notably. Quotas began to be increased in 2014, and in 2017 ICCAT again announced increases in the total quota which would take it to 38,350 tonnes by 2020. This level will be nearly three times the 2011 low adopted as part of the recovery plan.

There is still debate over exactly how substantial the recovery has been and whether ICCAT is risking a reversal in the recovery with the latest increase. However, what is undeniable is that the Atlantic bluefin tuna stock has been brought back from the brink and is now on the road to recovery.

We do not know exactly what is behind their recent appearance in UK waters, but it is likely that changing migration patterns in their prey, brought about by changing currents and increasing water temperatures, along with the increase in abundance driving competition in their previous autumn feeding areas, are all key factors.

A “Brexit opportunity”

The European Union is a member of ICCAT and through that it receives a quota for bluefin tuna, amounting to approximately 16,000 tonnes in 2018. This in turn is then allocated to a number of EU member states, predominantly Spain, France and Italy, based largely upon their historic commercial fishing activities of this species.

ICCAT requires member states to allocate a proportion of their quota for the purposes of sports or recreational fishing. Without such an allocation recreational fishers may not target, fish for or land bluefin tuna. In the largest EU states this allocation is a paltry 1-2 per cent, around 40-50 tonnes in the three biggest quota holders.

However, the UK – in common with Denmark, Eire and Sweden where BFT have returned in increasing numbers – has no share of this EU quota and is therefore unable to fish for them, commercially or recreationally. Whilst a member of the EU, the UK would face lengthy and contentious negotiations with other EU members to obtain a share of the EU quota these states currently receive.

The UK’s impending departure from the EU presents a great opportunity in relation to bluefin. Upon departure from the EU, the UK is free to join ICCAT as a sovereign member and request a quota in its own right, joining the majority of other ICCAT member states.

The UK Government may not even need to request a share of the quota already allocated to other countries. A small ‘reserve’ quota is held by ICCAT to be allocated to new ‘artisanal’ fishery opportunities as they become apparent. The UK fishery we are proposing, would, we believe, meet those requirements and avoid lengthy negotiations over reallocation of the existing quotas. This presents a once in a generation opportunity to do the right thing and establish a sustainable, economically-optimal, scientifically-important UK fishery for bluefin tuna.

Too Valuable to catch only once

The Atlantic bluefin tuna is an iconic gamefish. Growing to over a 1,500lb and with great strength, speed and stamina they are one of the most sought-after gamefish on the planet, second only perhaps to blue marlin.

Anglers will travel the globe for a chance to hook, play and then release this ‘king of gamefish’. A substantial bluefin tuna live-release fishery exists in Canada, where studies show that the economic value of such fisheries is many times greater than that of a traditional commercial fishery.

A 2012 [study](#) by the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) undertaken two years after the introduction of the live-release fishery program, concluded that:

*‘live release bluefin have the potential to generate up to **six times more** revenue on a per tonne basis than a commercially caught bluefin’.*

EAC's study estimated that charter revenues alone created a value of CAD100,000 per tonne versus the landed value from commercial fishermen of CAD17,000. This was before additional revenue generation related to the charter industry was evaluated, i.e. hotels, restaurants, fuel, bait, tackle etc.

By 2014 in a CBC news interview covering the Nova Scotia fishery, bluefin charter boat captain Robert Boyd stated:

"With the charter industry, right now we're employed for six to seven weeks every fall, instead of just one or two days (harvesting their commercial quota). The economic spin off to that are just as valuable to the surrounding community as much as they are to us...It's different from commercial fishing. It's more of a tourism business than a fishing business..."

Atlantic Bluefin in UK waters have predominantly been located in the seas off of Cornwall, South West Wales, Northern Ireland and the Scottish Islands. These are areas that have suffered considerably in recent decades from the decline in traditional industries including commercial fishing. They post some of the lowest GDP per Capita statistics of the entire UK.

The potential for a fishery such as this to provide significant economic benefits to those areas is substantial. As mentioned in the Canadian example, charter fees are significant, but importantly are underpinned by wider societal benefits for other tourism related sectors, such as hoteliers, restaurants, fuel, tackle retailers etc.

How would this value be created in the UK?

Live-release fisheries for bluefin tuna leverage the value of the fishery through the very low proven mortality rates associated with such operations. Numerous scientific studies utilising data from electronic tracking tags identify that, if effectively regulated, the mortality rate of fish captured and released in this way is in the region of 3-5 per cent. Canada's own live-release fishery provided the most detailed such study, and they now routinely use a 3.6 per cent mortality rate.

What does that mean in real terms? Well, take a 20 tonne quota. If the fish average 200kg, 20t equals 100 bluefin. A 5 per cent mortality rate accommodates 2,000 'hookups' by anglers.

Rather than have just the value of 100 dead bluefin, (circa £300,000), you create potentially 2,000 charter vessel operations, (adjusted for days at sea per fish, number of hookups per day, etc. it could be higher or lower). Applying typical daily charter rates of up to £1,000 for recreational bluefin angling, the charter revenue potential alone is £2,000,000, dwarfing the commercial dockside value.

Whilst it is true that the dockside value multiplies as the product moves along the food supply chain (reports suggest by up to four times), in addition to this charter revenue, there are significant wider societal benefits from hotel occupancy, restaurants, etc. The total value per tonne generated by a live-release recreational fishery is still multiple times more than that of a traditional commercial fishery.

The key is a well-regulated fishery with the welfare and sustainability of the bluefin at its core. Rules governing tackle requirements, restricting the number of hookups per day and limiting fight times, all contribute to minimizing fish losses. Strict licensing, reporting and monitoring requirements ensure compliance and again, support best practice.

A UK bluefin tuna fishery. Why recreational live-release over commercial?

In addition to the substantial economic benefits accruing from a recreational live release fishery over a commercial one, there are several other reasons to favour this approach.

Appropriate caution must be exercised: there is still uncertainty amongst some conservation organisations and scientists over the exact extent of the stock recovery. Poor spawning years, prey depletion etc. could yet present new barriers to this recovery.

Are Bluefin yet 'out of the woods'? We just don't know for sure. However, operating an exclusively live-release fishery for several years utilising a very small quota would give us a 'window' to establish with more certainty the answers to these questions. The operation of such a fishery, especially with a parallel scientific program, incorporating various large-scale tagging operations and DNA sampling, could help provide those answers.

Rod and line fishing is the preferred method adopted by multiple scientific organisations carrying out research on giant bluefin tuna. In several recent large-scale tagging programs in Denmark, Sweden and Norway, (including one part funded by WWF), a fleet of authorised recreational anglers were employed (at their own cost) to carry out the capture of bluefin for tagging by scientists.

Private sector funding from organisations keen to be associated with such scientific research is likely to be forthcoming, reducing the demands upon the public purse when scientific research grants are under considerable pressure.

Is doing nothing an option?

Some voices have suggested we should do nothing and leave these UK bluefin alone, or at least for a few years to learn more about them.

Our proposal for a live-release fishery could come to fruition at the earliest by 2021 (we assume). If it were then operated for 3-4 years following a review and assessment, it would be 8-9 years from the first appearance of UK bluefin in numbers to the point where we would even consider a retained fishery of any sort.

The operation of a regulated live-release fishery would be exactly the kind of tool to use to learn more about them via the embedded research programs we have proposed.

Valuable resources are best managed with the local communities having a genuine stake in the future of those resources. "Doing nothing" with this opportunity would be a failure to represent the interests of those communities. Such a failure could have serious negative consequences. Development of a black market without regard for the welfare of the fish or the safety of the material entering the food chain is a very real possibility.

In contrast, prove to local communities that there are wide societal benefits to this radical approach to bluefin tuna management, and they become the biggest supporters and enforcers of a sustainable, regulated fishery.

Do nothing and we miss the opportunity to learn more about these iconic fish.
We leave a valuable untapped resource for economically challenged communities.

Whilst the UK does nothing, dozens of other nations will continue to execute a suboptimal fisheries structure, removing up to 38,350 tonnes of fish whilst we sit aside. We would be failing to use this 'blank sheet' opportunity to prove that there is a different, sustainable, economically optimal model to apply to fisheries for large, iconic pelagic species such as Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Our proposal

We propose that, upon leaving the European Union, the UK applies to ICAAT for a minimal initial quota of perhaps just 20 tonnes to facilitate a live-release bluefin tuna fishery.

Optimal distribution of the substantial societal benefits of this fishery are key, and stand in contrast to many of the narrowly held commercial fishing benefits in the UK.

A regional and gradual release of this quota would ensure a number of regions of the UK were able to benefit from this over the 'open season', which would be largely through the autumn months when other revenue flows in these tourism-dependent areas have declined.

A licensing system would control the number of vessels participating at any one time, along with a mandatory reporting and monitoring system to track quota utilization.

Controls on the tackle that could be employed, limits on the number of hookups permitted over specified timeframes, and possible limits on fight times would all play their part in contributing to fish welfare, sustainability and equitable quota management.

This fishery would be one of the most highly regulated and controlled in the world, putting the objectives of sustainability and optimal economic outcomes at its heart and contributing to the UK government's ambition for 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 in particular those fish visiting UK waters.

Such a fishery should operate for 3-4 years at least before a review of the information relating specifically to the UK fishery. This review should incorporate further evidence then available of the fortunes of the wider Atlantic stock.

Such a review, conducted independently by a recognized scientific institution, would determine the next phase of the fishery. Based upon that review, a recommendation could be made to halt, maintain or increase the scope of the live-release fishery, and even consider the introduction a 'retained' fishery alongside it, with a quota increase shared between commercial and recreational interests.

The UK has a blank page upon which to establish a new, radical approach to the management of bluefin tuna. An approach that puts the fish first, is sustainable whilst optimizing the economic and societal benefits, and supports further science-based understanding of this iconic gamefish.