

Dollars Without Sense: A Response to Volpe

Author: ALLEN, ROBIN

Source: BioScience, 55(8) : 644

Published By: American Institute of Biological Sciences

URL: [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2005\)055\[0644:DWSART\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2005)055[0644:DWSART]2.0.CO;2)

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Dollars Without Sense: A Response to Volpe

John Volpe's concern about the possible bad effects of aquaculture (*BioScience* 55: 301) is interesting and raises important issues. However, I do wish to correct the record in two areas concerning bluefin tuna in the Pacific Ocean.

First, Volpe states that "the Pacific bluefin is thought also to be in steep decline." However, information on the status of Pacific bluefin tuna, which is available on the Web site of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC; www.iattc.org/PDFFiles2/SAR2_bluefin_ENG.pdf), indicates no upward or downward trend in the catches of bluefin tuna during the 1952–1999 period (table 2.2a), which would not be the case if the stock were in steep decline. What is known about the status of bluefin tuna in the Pacific Ocean is summarized in section 5 of the online document.

Dr. Volpe goes on to say that "unlike its southern and Atlantic counterparts, this species does not benefit from oversight by an international regulatory body. Its population status is therefore largely unknown." Pacific bluefin tuna are studied by the IATTC, the National Research Institute of Far Seas Fisheries (NRIFSF) of Japan, and several other organizations in Japan. In fact, the NRIFSF has greatly increased its research on this species during the last five years or so. Management of the fisheries is the shared responsibility of the IATTC

and the newly created Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission.

Neither the statement referring to the lack of international oversight, nor the statement that the "status of the species is largely unknown," is justified.

The second correction addresses the assertion that because the capture vessel does not land the tuna (rather, the tuna is transferred to a pen), companies are able "to circumvent every regional and international regulation established to protect tuna populations." In fact, vessels that catch Pacific bluefin tuna for ranching all carry observers, and all of the catches that are transferred to pens are recorded.

ROBIN ALLEN

Inter-American Tropical
Tuna Commission
8604 La Jolla Shores Drive
La Jolla, CA 92037

Response from Volpe

I thank Dr. Allen for his thoughtful contribution to this issue. We concur on the information at hand but differ in interpretation. Dr. Allen cites figures for catch of total biomass over time that are more or less stable. However, because the mean individual weight within the fishery has dropped to approximately 7 kg and given the species an exceptionally conservative recruitment profile, I interpret this as a steep decline in overall species health.

I take Dr. Allen's point that in the past few years the northern Pacific bluefin tuna have enjoyed an increased profile within international management agencies. However, it is still early days and too soon to judge whether this will translate into more effective management. Leading sustainable seafood analysts, such as Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch Program (www.seafoodwatch.org), among others, have adopted a wait-and-see approach.

Finally, while those vessels involved in the live capture of northern Pacific bluefin for ranching may have observers onboard, this is certainly not the case for all bluefin ranching fisheries—particularly Atlantic bluefin—where it is generally accepted that substantial volumes of unregulated bluefin are traded outside legal channels.

JOHN P. VOLPE

School of Environmental Studies
University of Victoria
British Columbia V8W 2Y2
Canada

Letters to the Editor

BioScience
1444 I Street, NW, Suite 200
Washington, DC 20005
E-mail: bioscience@aibs.org

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Published by the American Institute of Biological Sciences