

Tuna labelling

Tuning tuna

The Organization for Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries is now developing a label for the Japanese tuna *sashimi* market

Tuna is among the most valuable of fish, serving as a nutritional staple in many countries, and is one of the most popular commodities of international trade. It also provides income and foreign currency earning opportunities to many fishermen, traders, and distributors around the world, in both developed and advanced countries alike.

Overfishing of tuna tends to occur because of the large and constant demand in the world. Proper conservation and management are, therefore, essential for ensuring the sustainable use of tuna. International management is vital because of the highly migratory nature of tuna, which travel thousands of miles each year through the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) of coastal States and across the high seas.

In view of such a nature, the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) has called on States to co-operate directly, or through appropriate international organizations, to ensure conservation and optimum utilization of the species, both within and beyond the EEZs.

Japan is one of the largest consumers of tuna in the world and virtually the only nation that consumes tunas in *sashimi* as an inherent part of the food culture. *Sashimi* is fresh tuna sliced into small pieces, dipped in soy source and *wasabi* (Japanese horse radish), and consumed raw. *Sushi* is another popular Japanese method of eating raw tuna.

The annual consumption of *sashimi* tuna in Japan is about 450,000 tonnes, the largest in the world. Of this, 60 per cent is imported. (Last year, 78 countries exported tuna to the Japanese *sashimi*

market, a significant increase from only 33 countries in 1985.)

The reason why the Japanese *sashimi* tuna market has attracted a large amount of international business is because of the huge demand and high selling price that it commands, compared with other markets. The price of high-quality tuna sold into the *sashimi* market in Japan is 10 to 30 times higher than that of canned tuna.

The current problems involve the decline of commercially important tuna species and rampant illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) tuna fishing. It is estimated that about 22,000 tonnes of tuna are harvested by IUU fishing by large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels and imported to Japan, despite the recent stock decline for some of important tuna species such as bluefin tuna.

If this situation persists, it is likely that tuna resources around the world will be severely depleted and the efforts of international tuna resource management will be seriously undermined. Consequently, Japan has come under criticism for its market demand contributing to the decline of commercially valued tuna stocks. As an importing nation, and not merely as a fishing nation, Japan has considered it an important responsibility to ensure the conservation and management of tuna.

FAO plan

In view of the increased concern caused by excess fishing capacity in world fisheries, in 1999 the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) adopted an International Plan of Action for the Management of Fishing Capacity. The plan outlines the urgent measures needed for major international fisheries. Article 40

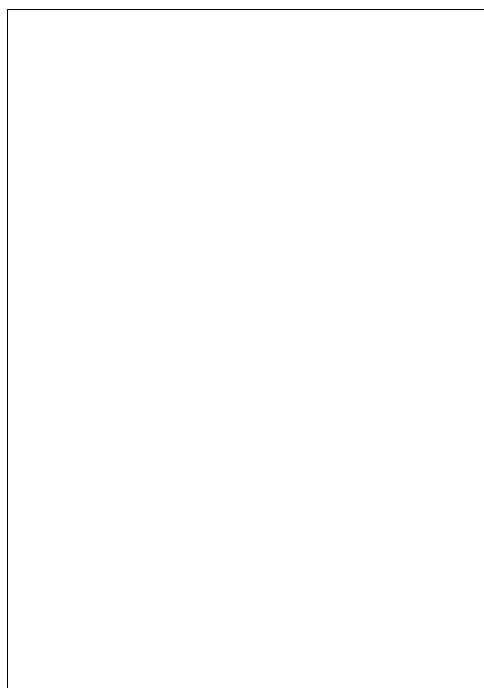
indicates that the required reduction of the fleet would vary from fishery to fishery. Furthermore, a 20-30 per cent reduction was specifically noted for the large-scale tuna longline fleet. This indicates that an international effort is urgently required to restore tuna stocks. In response to the adoption of the International Plan by FAO, Japan immediately scrapped 132 large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels, representing 20 per cent of the total number of vessels.

In 2001, FAO also adopted an International Plan of Action regarding IUU fishing, calling on the international community to take immediate actions for appropriate management of fisheries, including tuna fisheries. IUU tuna longline fishing vessels intentionally transfer their registration to countries that are not members of the international tuna resource management organizations, with the aim of engaging in fishing without adhering to any of the international resource management measures. They pose serious problems for the conservation and management of tuna. If their fishing activities are allowed to continue, the scrapping of a large number of tuna longline fishing vessels by Japan to restore the stock will amount to nought.

Unfortunately, the yearly reviews of various trade and sighting data reveal that IUU tuna fishing operators endeavour to continue their activities by all means. They frequently rename and reflag their vessels to evade international sanctions. Since IUU fishing is motivated by selling harvests on the international market, countries with a large lucrative tuna market, such as Japan, are virtually providing economic incentives to continue IUU fishing activities. It is, therefore, necessary to establish proper measures, including an effective responsible trading system, for resource management.

The Organization for Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries (OPRT, www.oprt.or.jp) is an initiative by Japan to promote conservation and sustainable use of tuna through the co-operation of all stakeholders in tuna fisheries

Prompted by the abovementioned circumstances, Japanese parties related to



tuna fisheries decided to establish OPRT with the support of the Government of Japan.

OPRT, established on 8 December 2000, represents a private-sector initiative of tuna fishing operators, traders, distributors and consumers, under the common understanding that Japan, as one of the leading tuna fishing nations and a major tuna consuming nation, is responsible for conserving and managing tuna resources. In other words, OPRT was formed by the concerted will of all stakeholders related to tuna fisheries. The tuna longline fishing industry of Chinese Taipei joined OPRT from the outset as the only foreign member.

OPRT's mission is to contribute to the development of tuna fisheries in line with international social responsibility by fostering healthy tuna markets, and to promote the conservation, management and sustainable use of tuna. This bottom-up initiative is also supported by the governments of major tuna longline fishing nations. Membership in OPRT is open to all large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels practicing responsible fishing and having a firm commitment to co-operate under the OPRT framework.

Vessels registered

The current number of vessels registered under OPRT is 1,267, about 80 per cent of all longline tuna vessels operating around

the world. Fishing entities that are members of OPRT are from China, Taipei, Indonesia, Japan, Korea and the Philippines. OPRT is now proposing that the tuna longline fishing industry of the People's Republic of China becomes a member, so that its mission may be fully achieved under the co-operation of all the major tuna longline fishing industries in the world.

In order to achieve this mission, OPRT has been undertaking several activities, such as providing various types of information obtained from the Japanese market to flag States committed to responsible and sustainable management of tuna resources, namely, the countries whose industries are members of OPRT. The aim is to develop a 'positive list' of large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels operating in compliance with the resource management measures, and to buy and scrap IUU tuna longline fishing vessels.

OPRT has also been working to develop a consumer-oriented labelling project as a tool to foster a healthy *sashimi* tuna market. It aims to allow the identification of tuna caught by large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels in a responsible manner, adhering to international fisheries management rules. OPRT can provide accurate information to distributors and consumers as to whether the tuna brought into the Japanese market are caught by fishermen complying with resource management measures.

In March this year, OPRT publicly announced its intention to develop the project and requested the Japanese public to provide ideas for a label design. Over 1,200 designs were received by September, confirming the high interest of the people for the project. These designs are to be reviewed by OPRT's tuna label developing committee, and the design considered most suitable for achieving the aim of the project will be chosen. It is planned to initially implement a small-scale pilot project starting December this year, with financial support from the Government of Japan.

OPRT will encourage dealers and retailers to participate in the project. Through a

pilot project to be carried out by next March, OPRT will study the response of dealers and consumers to the project, and develop an effective and cost-efficient management system for tuna labelling.

OPRT hopes that its tuna labelling project may eventually help establish a responsible and fair trading system for tuna, and foster a sound and stable market, and thereby assure a sustainable tuna fisheries for the benefit of all the parties that depend on tuna resources. 3

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