



The Atlantic bluefin tuna ICCAT 2020 stock assessment

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In the coming months, ICCAT should issue a further assessment of the state of the stocks of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna across the Atlantic. ICCAT decided to undertake the next formal review in 2022, two years after the last one, not the previously standard three years. We hope to report on that in coming months.

The 2020 assessment was of great significance for a variety of reasons. Not only did it underpin previous estimates and decisions that were questioned at the time, but it also acknowledged some big changes in thinking around 'Bluefin science'. We thought it would be useful to update and reissue our piece on the 2020 assessment first published in 3/2021

Who are 'we'?

The UK Bluefin Tuna Association is a not-for-profit membership organisation established by anglers, charter skippers and fishing organisations to represent anglers interests in relation to bluefin.

Its mission is to campaign for a sustainable management strategy, to support research into their presence here, and to seek the establishment of a **recreational catch and release fishery** for them our waters.

The people behind the UKBFTA set up 'BFT UK' back in 2018 and engaged with government bodies, lobbying to have anglers voices heard. We gathered cross party political support and a seat at important policy making tables and meetings with senior UK Government officials including Fisheries Ministers.

We won, co-designed and delivered with DEFRA, CEFAS and other bodies the hugely successful English 2021 Catch And Release Tagging ('CHART') programme. We have subsequently secured an expansion of the English programme in size and season length, and the establishment of CHART programmes in Wales and Northern Ireland in 2022.

We claim no monopoly on representing anglers and skippers interests, but believe we incorporate in our ranks the greatest combined expertise in the UK, on the science, regulations and fishing for bluefin, have a proven track record in working with political representatives, government departments, E-NGO's and other bodies to ensure that an evidence based approach is used in determining policy.

Back from the Brink

This note was first published in March 2021 and has been edited and updated as at September 2022.

'.....the Group notes that, viewed more broadly, the available data do clearly indicate that the biomass of the East Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna has increased since the late 2000s, is high at present, and that there are no concerns that overfishing may be occurring under the current TAC (36,000t in 2020).'

'The combination of size limits and the reduction of catch has certainly contributed to a rapid increase in the abundance of the stock.'

(https://www.iccat.int/Documents/SCRS/SCRS_2020_Advice_ENG.pdf)

In September 2020, the scientific research arm of ICCAT, the SCRS published their most recent stock assessment for Atlantic Bluefin Tuna. The triennial reports form the basis for Quota setting by the management body for

the following three years.

This report, despite uncertainties regarding the exact scale of the irrefutable recovery, (see below), marks a seminal point in the history of Atlantic Bluefin.

Conservation groups the WWF and Pew Charitable Trust in February 2021 sponsored a virtual conference on Atlantic Bluefin management. Their introduction stated:

'As the Atlantic bluefin tuna leaves its concerning past behind, we kindly invite you to join a 2-day virtual meeting to discuss the future of this iconic fish.'

'Since 2018, the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) has moved from years of emergency measures and recovery plans towards an interim management plan, which included the highest total allowable catch ever set for bluefin tuna, starting a new phase for the management of this stock that offers new opportunities and challenges.'





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Good news, if not 'mission accomplished'.

It is too early to declare 'mission accomplished', however this remarkable turnaround should at the very least be acknowledged for the conservation success story it is.

Much mainstream media coverage is still stuck in the very dark past of the species history, and fails to even mention this remarkable recovery story.

In 2015 the evidence of the turnaround in the species fortunes was already such that the IUCN that year assigned a two notch better status to the 'Eastern Atlantic/ Mediterranean' stock, (E-BFT), (Which comprises over 90% of the global total).

The 'Near Threatened' status applied was outside of the IUCN's three 'threatened' categories, and the assessment even considered applying the 'Least

Concern' status:

'The estimated spawning stock biomass (SSB) has increased over the past three generation lengths (21 years), and is currently close to exceeding the maximum SSB in the time series (1957-1959) depending on the model specifications. The current assessment, if it is correct, would lead to Least Concern.'

*However, the virtual population analysis (VPA) methodology is completely dependent on the reported landings, which are uncertain, and the trend is driven by data from the last two years which, in a VPA, are the least reliable of the time series. Therefore, *T. thynnus* is assessed as Near Threatened in the European marine region.*

Two years later, in 2017 the Triennial ICCAT E-BFT stock assessment indicated across a wide range of outputs that a meaningful recovery was still under way. Every single one of dozens of models output and multiple indices of abundance indicated a substantial recovery.

Such was the extent of this that in 2018 ICCAT members agreed to curtail the 15 year recovery plan several years early, and replace it with an Annual Management plan. The 2020 Triennial stock assessment was anticipated to incorporate refinements to further improve the quality of estimates of SSB and Quota recommendations.

Much had changed with regards to the scientific community's understanding of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna in the previous five to six years. It was hoped that refined modelling further informed by this could help improve the precision of the stock assessments. The Covid-19 Pandemic however interrupted that process. Rather than postpone the assessment, ICCAT requested the SCRS undertake a 'strict update' assessment that limited the review to largely updating previous models/data.



Back from the brink.

Just 10 years ago ABFT stocks were at all time lows, in 2011 the IUCN declared the species to be Globally Endangered.

A 15 year recovery plan had been initiated in 2007, but it was too early in 2010 to say how effective this might be at halting and reversing the devastating effects of decades of commercial overfishing.

However, by 2014 the stock assessment and review undertaken by ICCAT's scientific research arm saw signs that the decline had been halted and a small reverse in their fortunes was under way.





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Stocks doubled, tripled, quadrupled?

The conclusions of the 2020 assessment indicated that not only was the recovery continuing, but that the recovery between 2010 and 2015 had in fact been much larger than previously thought at the time of the 2017 report.

The 2015 SSB was now indicated to have been c700,000t not 550,000t, from a low of around 250,000t,

Furthermore the recovery had continued at a dramatic pace beyond 2015. The base case models were suggesting the SSB had reached 873,000t by 2018 (which is the highest estimate ever and 30% above the maximum in the 1970's).

To good to be true?

However, the SCRS scientists cautioned that this further huge recovery went beyond what was indicated in other indices of abundance, and in part was due to changes in estimates of recruitment, (see Fig1 RH chart above), which exhibited notable volatility.

Lacking confidence in the 873,000 tonne number the SCRS took the unprecedented step of declining to endorse that estimate or issuing new TAC recommendations for 2021-2023 based upon it.

Nonetheless, the SCRS were still required to come up with some form of proposal regarding the appropriate level of Quota for 2021 and beyond.

Fortunately, the 2018 decision to replace the Recovery plan early had been accompanied by a requirement for the SCRS to recheck the stock forecasts and TAC recommendations for 2019-2020 using more up to date data.

The work they had done in 2018 and 2019 facilitated a review of the forecasts they had made in 2017 that had informed the Quotas set in 2017 for the 2018-2020 period. At the very least that would help determine how appropriate the 2020 record 36,000t Quota was.

Previous uncertainties reduced.

'In 2018 and 2019, as requested in Rec. 18-02 the Committee evaluated whether the stock size indicators supported the TAC advice for 2019 (32,240 t) and 2020 (36,000 t), which arose from the 2017 assessment, and found that to be the case on both occasions....'

'Evaluation of recent changes in these indicators in 2020 (SCRS/2020/128) has strengthened the support for Rec.18-02.....'

In other words, updated analysis sup-

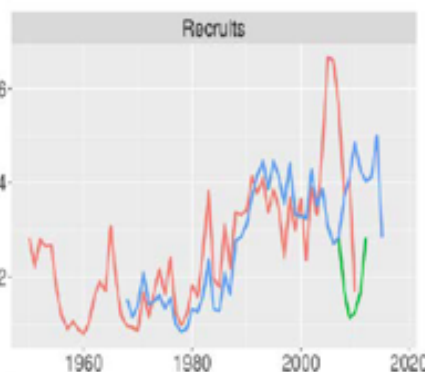
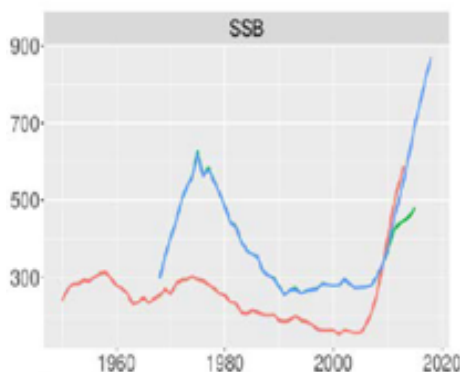


ported the substantial Quota increases adopted for 2018-2020 and underlined the substantial stock recovery since 2010's low point.

'.....compared to 2017, the extra data now available confirm a recent stock biomass increase, although the magnitude of the increase remains difficult to quantify. FCUR appears to be clearly below F0.1 (FCUR[2015-2017]/F0.1= 0.426), indicating a stock status determination of not overfishing.'

'Consequently, the Committee recommends that the 2020 TAC [Rec 19-04 para. 5] of 36,000 t be maintained for 2021 and 2022.'

Much attention is focused upon the 'uncertainties' in the 2020 SCRS assessment. However that uncertainty basically comes down to whether stocks have doubled, tripled, or nearly quadrupled since 2010....



The SCRS were confident that the recovery was substantial enough to warrant a continuation of record Quota levels, (triple that of 2010) and that at those record levels the species was NOT being overfished.

It is worth noting that this 2021-2022 TAC recommendation was NOT opposed by WWF or Pew Charitable Trust, in contrast to their original position on the adoption of the substantial quota uplifts agreed in 2017 for 2018-2020.



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IUCN acknowledges a conservation success story.

(Added 9/2021)

The IUCN publish their status updates in March and September of each year. That tenth anniversary review of the Global status of Atlantic bluefin tuna was due to have been published in March 2021. For whatever reason, Covid-19, disbelieving conservationists? Publication was delayed until September.

When the update came it exceeded even the expectations of those who had anticipated the Global status to match that of the 2015 'European' assessment and classification, ('Near Threatened'). The IUCN went even further and ranked Atlantic Bluefin Tuna at the Global level as 'Least Concern'. Some three notches better than the 2011 'Endangered' status, 'Least Concern' is the lowest ranking that can be applied when there is sufficient data for a review to be undertaken.

Concerns remained regarding the Western Atlantic Bluefin Tuna stock status, but given the Eastern stock comprises some 90% or so of the GLOBAL stock, the 'least concern' status was determined to be appropriate.



Western Atlantic Bluefin.

It is worth mentioning that the 2020 W-BFT ICCAT stock assessment originally painted a very gloomy picture and the recommendation of the scientific committee was to cut quotas by 24% from 2,350t to 1,785t.

In an unprecedented move the US Board of ICCAT rejected this recommendation in the face of representations from commercial and recreational angling groups that it in no way reflected the reality on the ground.

They argued that the source data was flawed and as a result the assessment was failing to reflect a recovery they were convinced was underway.

The US ICCAT board recommended that the 2,350t TAC was maintained for 2021 (which was adopted by the wider ICCAT Board), and a review of the data sources undertaken.

I joined one of those review meetings in February 2021 as an interested observer. Various groups highlighted why the changing nature of the fishery over a decade or more had rendered the historic data collection tools to be a poor measure of what was happening with the stock.

The Scientific committee reviewed their processes, and the data, and in an incredible reversal they disowned their previous assessments and recommendations and issued a new one for 2022. Instead of a 24% reduction, 2022 would actually see an INCREASE in the annual TAC, from 2,350t to 2,726t, a 16% uplift.

It is fair to say that there is a high degree of uncertainty regarding the state and outlook for the 'Western stock'. The last 6 years has seen a major rethink on where/when ABFT spawn in the Western Atlantic, the age at which they spawn, and even whether there is actually a distinct 'Western stock' to speak of given new discoveries regarding the presence of 'Eastern Atlantic' DNA in a significant proportion of 'Western fish', and the existence of a 'genetically intermediate' stock of BFT as a result of decades of mixing of 'western' and 'Eastern' fish.

Time, and more research will tell, but it is worth flagging that the worrying assessment for the 'Western stock' in the original 2020 report has been replaced with a much less negative assessment. That does not stop some bodies continuing to refer to that original report, in much the same way as they cited the 'endangered' status of Atlantic bluefin long after it was apparent (in 2015) that this was no longer valid.



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2023 and beyond?

As we update this note, (9/2022), the stock assessment and quota review process is about to undergo some major changes. A "Management Strategy Evaluation" (MSE) process has been underway within ICCAT designed to make the stock assessment and quota review process more robust, and less vulnerable to political/corporate interference. In November 2022 an ICCAT meeting should set out quota plans for 2023-2024.

Some of the initial work on revising indices, refining models etc took place at sessions earlier this year. Whilst uncertainties exist regarding the absolute scale of the stock, and that of the recovery since the lows of the early 2000s, the vast majority of dozens of models continue to confirm that there has been a remarkable recovery since the imposition of the stock recovery plan in 2007. We intend to provide more colour and updates on this process as it unfolds in coming months.

Conclusion.

Under normal circumstances the recovery of a species from 'Endangered' to 'Least Concern' within ten years, especially an iconic, bellweather species such as Atlantic bluefin tuna, would have been cause for great celebration and intense media coverage.

For whatever reason the response was somewhat subdued. Maybe good news doesn't carry as much weight as bad news? Maybe good news adversely impacts fundraising for some organisations?

Whatever the reason, my personal view is that this downplaying of the situation is not helpful in the medium term for those interested and engaged in efforts to improve the fortunes of threatened species.

Surely it would be better to use this example to show what CAN be achieved when fishery managers, conservation bodies, scientists and fishers work TOGETHER and deliver real change. In the



end we all benefit. Surely this underpins the arguments for timely, effective action in the face of such threats to the long term future of these species.....?

In any event, the 2020 SCRS assessment and the 2021 IUCN reranking of ABFT have gone some way to debunking the

oft repeated 'endangered', 'beyond the brink' etc that dominated media coverage for some time after it was actually apparent that this was not the case....

As we said back in early 2021 though, this is not 'mission accomplished', not a basis for yet more huge increases in quotas, not the green light for yet more 'boom and bust' policies of exploitation. We came back from the brink, we got lucky, it is time to reflect on the lessons learned and look at new models for the management of iconic, still vulnerable species such as Atlantic bluefin.....

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