



ATLANTIC BLUEFIN TUNA IN THE UK

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Atlantic bluefin tuna are now in the seventh year of their seasonal migrations that bring them to the Western waters of the UK each autumn. We receive a lot of questions about why they are here, who manages them, can anglers or commercial fishermen fish for them and a host of other topics.

We thought it would be useful to put in one place a note which answers some of the most frequently asked questions we receive.

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.

Question and Answer

THE FISH

Why are they here?

No-one really knows for sure.

The most likely reason is a combination of factors.

1) Long term (20-40 year) environmental cycles that occur in the North Atlantic which create more or less favourable conditions for bluefin in the NE Atlantic.

2) A significant stock recovery that may be increasing the sheer number of bluefin in our waters and forcing them to range further from competition.

3) Climate change related factors that are altering the prey and habitat condition in our waters and supporting greater numbers of bluefin here.

Stock recovery. Aren't Atlantic Bluefin 'endangered'?

No, far from it. Huge commercial over-fishing of the species devastated the stock through the last 30 years of the last century.

By the early 2000s they were in a dire state and in 2011 were ranked as 'Endangered' by the highly respected IUCN who manage the 'red list' of species 'status'.

A far reaching 15 year recovery plan implemented from 2007 by the global body responsible for their management, ICCAT, has contributed to a dramatic recovery in stocks since around 2010.

In 2021, at the ten year review point of the status, the IUCN applied a status of 'Least Concern' to Atlantic bluefin globally, the lowest possible ranking in their

scale, acknowledging what has been a huge conservation success story.

Uncertainty regarding the precise extent of this recovery does exist, but the multiple stock assessments undertaken since 2014 show a irrefutable recovery that in the last (2020) assessment suggested may be between three and five times that of the low point, back to levels not seen since the 1960's or 70's.

You mentioned 'climate change', are they here because of warmer waters? Not directly.

Atlantic bluefin have an amazing physiology which enables mature fish to inhabit waters from as cold as just 6 degrees, to as high as 33 degrees. They can be found in the warm waters of the Mediterranean or Gulf of Mexico in June, and then near the arctic circle in December.

What climate change MAY be impacting is the current flows and water temperatures that affect 'production' in the waters of the NE Atlantic. i.e.

The cycle of plankton creation, tiny fish that prey on them, bigger fish that eat them and so on, such that bluefin 'following the food' from late summer after spawning are finding a huge larder of prey in new waters.

So where and when do they spawn? For decades the 'scientific consensus' was that bluefin spawned around June/July, only in the Gulf of Mexico, and at various Mediterranean locations.

In the last six years new research has shown that several other spawning locations exist, on both sides of the Atlantic, and that a lot of the stock mixing hypotheses and other 'received wisdom' is likely to be wrong.



Q & A

Management-ICCAT

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What is 'ICCAT'

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna. ICCAT, are a global body that oversee the management of Atlantic bluefin across their entire range in the Atlantic Ocean.

It is comprised of 48 'contracting parties' (so over 70 nations when you break down the EU membership), who are all members of the UN and have signed a binding treaty regarding the management of bluefin.

ICCAT has a scientific arm that undertake periodic stock assessments (usually triannual but potentially more frequent from 2022), and make quote recommendations to the board.

ICCAT have had a chequered history in the management of bluefin but in the last 10 years or so have improved their structure and practices which helped contribute to the significant stock recovery mentioned earlier.

The UK prior to leaving the EU was a member of ICCAT under the EU 'umbrella', but in 2020 joined as a sovereign member in their own right.

How is 'quota' allocated currently? Globally over 38,000 tonnes of 'Total Allowable Catch' ('TAC') is allocated to some (not all) member states. Around 2,500t of this is allocated to the 'Western stock', and 36,000 to the 'Eastern stock'.

As mentioned earlier, there is new thinking about the mixing between 'Western' and 'Eastern' fish but it is still understood that around 80%, maybe 90%+ of Atlantic bluefin, spawn and spend most or all of the year in the Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean.

Of the 36,000t of 'Eastern' TAC, the EU holds just over half, and of that around 75% is divided up between France, Spain and Italy.

13 ICCAT Quota holding members operate recreational fisheries of some type.

But isn't it a commercial fishing 'free for all' really?

No management is perfect, but the Atlantic bluefin fishery is now one of the most monitored, reported upon and enforced fisheries on the planet.

There is still of course some illegal, underreported or unreported fishing, (IUU), but it is generally acknowledged that this is fairly low, in contrast to the 1997-2007 period when it is now assessed that over twice the 30,000t



quota was being caught annually....

Vessels are specifically authorised, in many cases are GPS tracked, have monitors on board, fish are tagged for tracking from the point of capture, and may fish with specified methods, in dedicated zones, for a mandated season only.

A lot of the stories and concerns about 'foreign boats' taking 'our tuna' do not hold up to scrutiny.

So does the UK have any 'quota'? Yes.

In the 12/2020 'Trade and Co-operation Agreement' signed between the UK and EU, (the 'divorce deal'), the UK was allocated 0.25% of the EU's TAC, amounting to 48.4t.

We are now a quota holding ICCAT member with additional obligations for the UK Government to their manage stocks in our waters.

How is that quota used?

So far there has been no agreement on dividing it up between the home na-

tions, and thus the UK quota allocation has been as follows.

10t was set aside for mortality in research programmes (e.g. CHART). 20t was set aside for commercial bycatch targeting other species. (Specified commercial vessels are allowed to sell one 'bycaught' bluefin per day). 18.4t was 'unallocated' in 2021 and 2022 and no 'targeted' commercial or recreational fishing (outside of CHART) was authorised.

In 2021 around 1.4t was utilised for mortality in CHART, and around 1.6t for commercially bycaught bluefin.



Q & A

The financial implications

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But it is a financial goldmine right?

Aren't these fish worth ten of thousands of pounds each commercially?

Another bluefin myth...

Based upon dockside prices in developed fisheries, each UK caught bluefin, in tip-top condition are likely to fetch about £2-3,000. Going through the

A bycaught (trawled) bluefin sold at Plymouth in 2021 went for less per kilo than pollack on the day, fetching £600 in total.

Even Norway, with 300t+ of quota and a history of commercial bluefin fishing until the 1960's struggle to put fish on the dock that are acceptable to the valuable international market.

The Socio-economic survey carried out alongside the English 2021 CHART programme showed that a small scale, (15 boats), short season, (three months) tightly constrained operation generated nearly £900,000 (of 'Gross Value Added' as the economists call it), for a few ports in the SouthWest of England.

That programme incurred 10 bluefin mortalities that required some of that 10t of Quota to be set aside against it, (a tiny 1.4% incidental mortality rate of the 730 fish captured).

Each mortality that required 'quota use' therefore generated around £90,000 in revenue for local communities. (The mortalities went to scientific organisations for research).

Even accounting for possibly slightly higher mortalities in a larger recreational fishery, and the further value of commercial fish beyond the dockside, on a per fish or per tonne basis, it is accurate to say that recreationally caught and released bluefin are worth per fish/tonne many multiples that of a commercial fishery.

The Scandi programme and survey indicated economic results that were even more in favour of recreational over commercial fishing.



chain to the plate, the total value of Atlantic bluefin may be up to four times that dockside price, but much of that accrues to wholesalers, retailers and restaurants far away from the fishing communities that land them.

The much publicised Japanese bluefin sale in Tokyo each January has previously sold for hundreds of thousands or more, BUT this is a marketing/advertising gimmick for the 'first sale of the year' and bears no resemblance to the reality of 'normal' prices.

Fish must also be in tip-top condition for sale, requiring them to be caught in a specific manner, and carefully handled by the captors and in the food chain. Use the wrong techniques, handle them badly and you can be left with little more than catfood.

A commercial bluefin fishery can of course bring economic value but it is not easy to deliver and the UK's tiny quota is worth peanuts versus other commercial fisheries in UK waters.

So what about recreational fisheries? Until the last few years, we only had economic studies of the value of bluefin tuna in recreational fisheries far from our European ones. Research in Canada and the US had shown that the spend by anglers in pursuit of their sport could be very substantial, multiples per fish or per tonne of that generated by the commercial fishing of the species.

Recent 'science fisheries' such as CHART and the 'Scandinavian Bluefin Marathon' have provided insights into the economic potential of recreational fisheries closer to home.





Q & A

UK recreational fishing opportunities

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So given their presence and reported economic value to coastal communities, can anglers fish for them?

Yes and no.....

Quota holding ICCAT member states may authorise recreational fisheries, but are also required to fulfil many regulatory obligations in relation to that membership and quota.

In order to determine the presence, impact of fishing, required monitoring and reporting obligations, DEFRA determined that before any policy decision regarding quota use scientific investigation is required.

This had already begun in 2018 with the small scale, expensive 'ThunnusUK' archival satellite tagging programme, but large scale research on distribution, spatially and temporally, interactions with fishermen, potential mortality, economic value etc was still required.

In England therefore a targeted recreational fishery has NOT yet been authorised, but the establishment, (instigated, pursued, won and delivered by anglers, skippers via 'BFT UK' from early 2020) of CHART was secured for 2021.

DEFRA's position is that the 'targeting of bluefin by recreational anglers' is illegal, outside of an authorised 'science fishery' (such as ThunnusUK or CHART).

What is CHART? How does it work?

An eleven month co-design and delivery process between Government agencies and representatives from the Recreational Sea Angling sector established 'English CHART'.

This is a 'science fishery' that permits authorised recreational charter fishing vessels and their customers to fish legally for bluefin with a view to recording large volumes of environmental/capture data and tag those fish.



An independent application assessment process was established and interested skippers applied, if they met criteria re coding, vessels etc. In 2021 15 vessels were selected based upon those application submissions and underwent intensive two day workshops held by government officials, scientists and recreational skippers and anglers.

These covered data collection, the regulatory framework, bluefin physiology and welfare, tagging and recovery protocols, best fishing practices to mitigate 'bad outcomes'.

At the heart of the programme design was participant safety, fish welfare, gathering data on the fish, capture impacts, and socio-economic benefits. Fishing gear and technique mandates were central to the programme design.

The 2021 programme results exceeded all expectations on multiple metrics. Fish caught and tagged totalled over 700, twice pre-season estimates. Angler participation exceeded 1,000, well above estimates.

The economic benefits exceeded expectations by a factor of two. Fish to boatside ratios, (reflecting numbers of 'lost fish') were in the high 80% area, well above estimates and that achieved in some other programmes.

Fight times were a fraction of that which DEFRA and opponents of the programme feared.

Crucially, incidental mortality rates were a world beating low at 1.4%, less than a third of what some government estimates predicted.

With 700+ fish tagged in 2021, (and possibly 1,000+ in 2022), this programme is delivering huge amounts of data to inform many key questions that require answers.

So the tagging is the key? Aren't recovery rates really low?

Actually, the tagging is not the most important part of the programme. It is the data collected whilst fishing and at the point of capture that is the most valuable output.

Of course recovering tags upon recapture is very useful, but those recapture rates historically have been very low, around 1.5-4%.

There is reason to believe that with thousands of bluefin now being tagged in the waters off Ireland, the UK and Scandinavia, that these tag recovery rates may yet significantly exceed the historical precedents.

(Early indications (from satellite/acoustic tagging) suggest high levels of 'site fidelity', (fish returning to the same place year after year), which may generate many recaptures.

The kind of smaller scale electronic tagging undertaken in the NE Atlantic since about 2017/18, coupled with the large scale 'spaghetti tagging' and data recording of thousands of angler led bluefin captures are complementary in what they teach us about bluefin.

They will help fill in many of the gaps in our knowledge and inform better management of the species.



Q & A

What of the future?

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CHART?

Both the ThunnusUK and CHART programmes have provided great insights into the presence of bluefin in UK waters.

But, they have diminishing returns in terms of the value of the data after a certain point, are expensive to run, and being limited in scale severely limit the potential for socio-economic benefits for hard-pressed coastal communities across the entire UK.

CHART has always been a potential stepping stone to a proper recreational catch and release fishery if the data gathered from the programme supported such a policy position.

We now have programmes getting under way in Wales and Northern Ireland, and Scotland has been undertaking its own research efforts outside of the 'CHART family' since 2021.



The scale of data gathered in the English programmes in recent years does in our view, vindicate progressing from a 'science fishery' to a licensed, sustainable recreational catch and release fishery from 2023.

We hope that the evidence from other Devolved Administrations programmes will support such a move there soon too.

Government policy position.

Much (but not all) of the policy re management of bluefin in UK waters is devolved to the fisheries management bodies of the four home nations.

Regarding England, DEFRA has in July-September 2022 undertaken a consultation process regarding the future use of bluefin quota to help determine the appropriate policy position. Working with our partners including the Angling Trust, Professional Boatman's Association, SCBI, SACGB and numerous skippers and anglers, the UKBFTA submitted to that consultation a paper making the case for a recreational catch and release fishery.

Through various platforms, we remain engaged with politicians, civil servants, scientific bodies and environmental groups to make our case for such a management strategy.

Why a licensed fishery?

We get asked why do we refer to a 'licensed, managed recreational fishery'? We have two answers to that.

Firstly, our ICCAT membership requires we meet a number of obligations. Included in those are that ANY fishery must have some form of control over access, fishing effort, monitoring and reporting to ensure quota use is

consistent with that allocated, and that illegal fishing levels are the lowest possible.

Typically that has been facilitated by ICCAT members operating fisheries via a form of licensing to control access, along with monitoring and reporting obligations. These are basic ICCAT requirements that need to be incorporated into any fishery, even a recreational catch and release one.

Secondly, Atlantic bluefin in UK waters are large, powerful fish, (averaging 250-300lbs and up to 850lbs as recorded in multiple programme captures). They warrant great care in fishing for them, from the gear, techniques and experience of those operating in the fishery. Some anglers propose a 'free for all' that would do no favours in our view to the fish or the reputation of anglers.

Anglers injured through inappropriate practice, fish left dead to wash up on our shores, trailing line and hooks should not be seen as an acceptable price for some anglers non-existent 'rights'. Bluefin are a special fish in terms of the regulatory backdrop, their history of boom and bust, and the huge challenge they present to inexperienced and ill-equipped anglers. A managed fishery is in the interests of anglers, the fish, and the communities engaged in fishing for them.

We should also mention the very real public health risks of unmanaged bluefin fisheries. Being large, warm blooded and subject to unique physiological changes under intense activity, bluefin can pose real health risks to those consuming them if not properly controlled, i.e. in 'black market' landings.

Scombroid poisoning for example is one of the worst forms of food poisoning and can be fatal. We should not condone or encourage such landings of bluefin for many reasons including these.



Q & A

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And finally.....

Atlantic bluefin tuna are an iconic and unique fish.

Their history is both a sad lesson in the perils of unmanaged overfishing, and in what can be achieved when policymakers, fishermen and scientists work together to implement evidence based management strategies.

The regulations governing fishing for them are complex, and many myths exist around the fish and fishing for them.

From our genesis in 2018 BFT UK, and now the UKBFTA are committed to evidence based management, and the belief that recreational sea fishing provides both the best basis for scientific research, and following the evidence we have gathered, that a recreational catch and release fishery should take priority in any future management strategy.

Such a fishery would deliver a sustainable, scientifically and economically valuable use of a Natural Capital Asset, as the UK Government refer to such resources.

The UKBFTA is currently open to membership from licensed Chart vessels owner/operators and will open to individual members in early 2023.

You can find more details about us, our objectives and activities on our social media pages.

On Facebook: The UK Bluefin Tuna Association.

**Website: www.ukbfta.co.uk
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