

# Certifying Tunas

Only high-level awareness and continuous efforts by all stakeholders will ensure that the tuna certification scheme succeeds in conserving and managing tuna stocks

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**T**unyas are highly migratory species, and their conservation and management are realized through the co-operation of all countries concerned, in accordance with Article 64 of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) have been established from region to region, and have engaged in various activities to achieve the goal of conserving and managing tunas. Do the activities of RFMOs ensure the sustainable utilization of tuna resources around the world?

The world's annual catch of tunas, which stood at around 500,000 tonnes in the 1950s, has now reached 4.5 mn tonnes. Notably, the development of super-large-scale purse-seine fishing

It is our expectation that the tuna certification scheme, explained in detail below, will function as an effective measure to solve this problem. Needless to add, fishing activities by vessels not complying with resource management measures are one of the causes of overfishing—specifically, those vessels engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

Since its establishment in 2000, the Japan-based Organization for the Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries (OPRT) has been striving to eliminate IUU tuna fishing vessels, with the co-operation of major tuna longline fishing organizations in the world; trade, distribution and consumer organizations in Japan; and the governments concerned (see “Tuning tuna”, *SAMUDRA Report* No.33, November 2002, page 32). The tuna certification scheme by the RFMOs has assisted us greatly in our efforts toward this goal.

During the 1990s, about 250 large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels in the world had been operating without abiding by the international resource management rules established by the RFMOs. They are what are now known as IUU tuna fishing vessels, but at that time they had been called flag-of-convenience (FOC) tuna fishing vessels. The catches by those vessels had been exported almost in their entirety to Japan, the largest *sashimi* tuna market in the world.

## Loopholes

As a result, Japan had been accused by the international community of being a country that provides loopholes to the

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vessels and fish aggregating devices (FADs) in recent years has enabled efficient catch of tunas in large quantities.

Such an expansion of the catch rate has created concerns over the sustainability of tuna resources among many people in tuna fisheries. The stock levels of some species, such as Atlantic bluefin tuna and Southern bluefin tuna, have declined conspicuously as a result of overfishing. It may not be an exaggeration to say that the most important task now facing the RFMOs is control of overfishing of tunas.

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international resource management scheme established for conservation and management of tuna resources. With a clear determination to rectify this situation, the Government of Japan and the Japanese tuna fishing industry united in their efforts to eliminate FOC tuna fishing vessels in order to establish Japan's position as a responsible tuna fishing country with a responsible tuna market.

Such FOC fishing vessels have been finally eliminated now. The clue to the success in such efforts was that tunas caught by FOC fishing vessels were shut out from the international market. Without markets, there can be no production. FOC fishing vessels were ousted from the world's oceans as the market that supported their activities disappeared; in other words, the economic incentives for activities by FOC vessels were eliminated.

The statistical documentation scheme, introduced first by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and then by other RFMOs, was a model for the tuna certification scheme. Japan applied the certification scheme rigorously, grasped the actual situation of production of tunas imported to Japan, identified IUU tuna fishing vessels, and prevented entry of such catches into the Japanese market, thus succeeding in eliminating the presence of IUU fishing vessels.

Based on OPRT's experience, the tuna certification scheme is useful in that it clarifies how and where the tunas were caught. Its effective application can lead to the elimination of IUU tuna fishing vessels. What is of concern now is the possibility for fishing vessels, currently registered as legitimate vessels with each RFMO, to be turned into IUU fishing vessels.

Along with the increasingly excessive catch of tuna resources, the state of the resources is deteriorating. As a measure to hold in check this trend, the fishing regulations of the RFMOs have been tightened, with rigorous catch quotas being established. It is not easy for any country to comply with reduced catch quotas without curtailing the fishing capacity, which has already become excessive. In order to have

the catch quotas strictly complied with, a reduction of fishing capacity corresponding to the catch quotas will be an appropriate approach. In point of fact, the Government of Japan reduced the number of longline fishing vessels in Japan by 87 in March this year in order to cope with the reduction in catch quotas for Atlantic bluefin tuna and Western and Central Pacific bigeye tuna. It will be physically impossible to

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abide by reduced catch quotas while at the same time maintaining an excessive number of fishing vessels; if, however, the number of fishing vessels is not cut back, it would induce the occurrence of IUU fishing activities.

It is highly possible that the rigorous implementation of fishing regulations would lead to falsification of catch reports by legitimate fishing vessels registered with the RFMOs, non-reporting and falsification of tuna species caught (for example, reporting bluefin as bigeye), as well as falsification of fishing grounds (for example, reporting that tunas were caught in the Pacific although in actuality they were caught in the

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Inside the Tsukiji Market, Tokyo.  
Auctioneers selling deep-frozen tunas of *sashimi* grade

Atlantic). In short, there is a concern that legitimate fishing vessels may turn themselves into IUU fishing vessels. It is a well-known fact that in bluefin tuna fishing in the Eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean, catch quotas have not been complied with, giving rise to a number of problems.

The tuna certification scheme may serve in solving these problems. However, in order for the scheme to become truly effective, it is crucial that both tuna-exporting countries and importing countries apply the scheme earnestly and seriously. Concretely, certification officers need to have the capacity to examine the accuracy of the information to be certified. Those who are in charge of certification in exporting countries are asked to examine rigorously the information supplied for certification, and are also required not only to examine the documents but also to inspect and verify, as appropriate, the data reported on the tunas actually caught.

In importing countries, on the other hand, efforts should be made to examine and analyze the catch information on certified tunas, and, in case where even a slightest suspicion exists, the management authorities should hold fast to the position of not allowing importation of the catch in question until such suspicion is dissipated. Furthermore, clear identification of fish species and fishing grounds has become possible by the progress of deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) inspection technology. Japan has been reinforcing the use of DNA inspection systems and has been exposing cases of falsified reports. It is important for other countries to also carry out DNA inspection, where necessary, and enforce supplementary measures to make certification more accurate and objective.

#### Fleet restructured

Taiwan was once subjected to ICCAT's sanction when it was exposed that Taiwanese fishing vessels that actually caught bigeye tunas in the Atlantic reported them to have been harvested in the Indian Ocean. As a result, Taiwan scrapped 160 of its large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels. After



Sashimi-grade tunas. A certification scheme may conserve tuna stocks

that, Taiwan restructured its tuna fisheries by establishing a responsible fisheries management system. As the Taiwanese case shows, elimination of IUU fishing vessels can be expected when such rigorous punitive measures are applied.

At any rate, in order to make the tuna certification system viable and effective, high-level awareness and continuous efforts are needed by all stakeholders who wish to ensure the sustainable use of tuna resources, which are a common property of humankind. Without such efforts, the tuna certification scheme will end up as a scheme that only compels futile paperwork.

#### For more



[www.oprt.or.jp](http://www.oprt.or.jp)

**Organization for the Promotion of Responsible Tuna Fisheries**

[www.tuna-org.org](http://www.tuna-org.org)

**Tuna Regional Fishery Management Organizations (RFMOs)**

[www.iccat.int](http://www.iccat.int)

**The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas**