

Jennifer E. Telesca

Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna

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Historically under the doctrine of *mare liberum* (freedom of the seas), any country could harvest tuna (McGuire 2003). Consequently, for many commentators, the race to secure these fish has seen their capture referred to as the last great ‘wild-fish gold rush’ (Greenberg 2010). Exploitation of the species also saw tuna become a key symbolic species for the continued depletion of global fisheries (Heffernan 2014: 81).

Since 1969, oversight of tuna and other tuna-like species has been carried out by a Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (RFMO) titled the International Commission for the Conservation of Tuna (ICCAT). However, this RFMO is infamous in environmental circles for its continued inability to prevent the ongoing over-exploitation of tuna to the point where its continued existence as a wild species has been put at risk.

Even ICCAT’s own independent review in 2008 noted disapprovingly that its performance ‘is widely regarded as an international disgrace and the international community which has entrusted the management of this iconic species to the ICCAT deserve better performance from ICCAT than it has received to date’ (Hurry, Hayashi and Maguire 2008: 2).

This makes the publication of Jennifer Telesca’s book *Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*, examining the performance of the RFMO, particularly important. The monograph is excellent in providing an insider account, taking us into the meetings of ICCAT, while highlighting how tuna has become just another profitable industrialised commodity despite its importance to the biosphere. Telesca exposes the problematic nature of ICCAT, where member-states, while understanding that their practices are short-sighted in the extreme, have historically insisted on their individual shares of this dwindling resource and have shaped ICCAT to fulfil their demands.

The author describes in vivid detail the geological history and lifecycle of tuna as well as a history of the global bluefin tuna trade, and the development of a flawed-from-the-beginning ICCAT with a focus on tuna as a mere commodity to be exploited. She observes that the Anthropocene era cannot be understood without acknowledging the role played by capitalism and global empire. When the global appetite for sushi containing tuna developed in the 1970s, rather than protecting tuna stocks, ICCAT aided and abetted their ongoing exploitation to the point where the fish was threatened with extinction. Telesca trenchantly argues that ICCAT states have not merely been flawed stock managers but have also engaged in behaviours that encourage market speculation.

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Telesca critically examines the development and role that ICCAT plays in perpetuating outmoded power structures that prioritise wealthy states, assigning tuna to member-states as state property through its flawed quota system. She is also highly critical of ICCAT proceedings, arguing correctly that ICCAT meetings are often ceremonial in nature and rarely meet their goals or indeed their rhetoric.

The author also analyses attempts by environmentalists to save tuna from extinction, rightly calling such simplified campaigns problematic. Environmentalists projected themselves as ‘saviours’ of tuna and set about ‘saving’ them in the early 1990s. She notes that while limited policy objectives were achieved, e.g. catch limits and public revelations of ICCAT’s poor behaviour and record, the campaigns also highlighted the limits to their model of popular resistance. She is also justly critical of the global mass media, which not only tended to overlook the issue of ongoing tuna exploitation for decades (the issue did not receive coverage in the *New York Times*, for example, until 1986, and the global press did not examine the issue till the early 1990s) but also cast the situation as one merely requiring ICCAT to improve its management structures, without allowing for more sophisticated analyses rooted in environmental justice concepts.

Telesca further writes how the purportedly neutral ICCAT scientific committee failed in its mission, proving willing to serve member-states’ priorities by altering data to support ongoing unsustainable catch limits. She provides an excellent case study of the 2010 ICCAT meeting, where internal dynamics and flawed rules of procedure enabled unscrupulous delegations from wealthy states to achieve their objective of continued fishing, despite scientifically supported evidence of crashing tuna stocks.

The monograph concludes with an intriguing thought-experiment. Based on her own experiences in visiting the Tokyo Sea Life Park, the author invites the reader to imagine a world where there is only one tuna left and the implications for the planet. Telesca seeks to have readers question their own role in this ongoing cycle of institutional predation, arguing the solution cannot be technology based. She forcefully argues that ICCAT as currently conceived is too enamoured with wealth accumulation to be the answer, and that the solution must involve a change in humanity’s systemic values and reject the current bifurcation of humanity and nature.

Curiously, however, the book’s analysis culminates in 2012, which is odd for a book published in 2020. Arguably, since the start of this decade ICCAT has stabilised tuna stocks and has taken some steps to improve its historically poor conservation record. An updated edition of the book focusing on this period could easily provide the reader with a more nuanced assessment of the organisation, and it would be worth exploring the reasons why stocks have levelled off. Despite this minor criticism, this is an excellent, thought-provoking and deeply researched monograph that is essential reading for anyone seeking

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to understand the inner workings of ICCAT and the complex nationalistic power structures that the organisation is still embedded in.

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