



WHO WILL SAVE PACIFIC TUNA? Tuna Commission Fails to Reach Agreement, Again

Panama City, Panama (July 1, 2008) –Faced with declining populations of bigeye and yellowfin tuna, the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) concluded its annual meeting last week in Panama City and failed to produce a binding conservation agreement. This was the IATTC's fourth attempt in the past year to adopt conservation measures to combat overfishing and launch the recovery of certain tuna populations in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. Once again negotiations failed.

According to the IATTC's own data, bigeye and yellowfin tuna populations are declining and the average size of captured individuals is decreasing. Meanwhile, fishing capacity, effort and efficiency are on the rise and the high capture rate of juveniles before they reach reproductive age is exacerbating population declines.

A growing coalition including international conservation organizations and recreational and commercial fishing interests has repeatedly issued joint statements calling upon the members of IATTC to take urgent action and follow the advice of the IATTC's own highly qualified scientific staff. This advice continues to be disregarded.

Of the management options considered by the member countries at the Panama meeting, most fell far short of the minimum recommended by IATTC scientists. The world will never know if the watered down measures would have succeeded as the dice have been rolled once again in

hopes that recovery will occur despite the ongoing absence of concerted action to stem tuna population declines.

While most countries indicated a willingness to negotiate and the delegations of Mexico, Venezuela, the United States and others worked tirelessly to build a consensus, a few member states were reluctant to compromise and effectively blocked adoption of a binding agreement. Though other nations dragged their feet, the failure to reach consensus was largely attributable to Colombia, which obstructed progress and even called into question the authority of the IATTC to issue binding conservation resolutions. Colombia, the IATTC's newest member, effectively derailed the negotiation process by demanding a special exemption from implementing the seven-week fishery closure period to allow fish stock recovery that all other member nations agreed to. Negotiations broke down as nations insisted that measures had to be applicable to all and Colombia refused to comply.

Despite conservation setbacks, the meeting represented an important victory for transparency and inclusion of non-fishing groups in the discussions. The Parties to the IATTC accepted a United States proposal that allowed a representative of the non-governmental organizations to participate with member countries in closed-door negotiating sessions.

Once a model for other regional fishery management organizations, the ability of the IATTC to manage tuna stocks is in question. The IATTC is known for its expert scientific staff, its strong fishery vessel observer program, and its successful program to reduce dolphin mortality by purse seine vessels. However, as international organizations pointed out to member countries during the Panama meeting's plenary session, past accomplishments cannot justify present inaction. Increasingly, the positions taken by some countries are formulated primarily on short-term economic considerations, rather than the long-term sustainability of the fisheries on which the food and job security of tens of thousands depend. The IATTC stands at a cross-road where member countries must define in its next October meeting whether to choose the path of being an effective or dysfunctional fisheries management organization.

Failure to reach a consensus does not result in a fishery closure, but rather a fishery operating without agreed conservation measures. Consequently, there is little incentive to compromise or reach agreement for those parties unwilling to join the majority in making difficult decisions. It remains to be seen whether the mounting pressure from the general public and seafood wholesale buyers, retailers and consumers will be enough to promote international cooperation at the IATTC. Market-based incentives combined with consumer purchasing power are fundamentally important in encouraging sustainability by rewarding responsible fishing nations in the Pacific and elsewhere. Until then, the long-term sustainability of the resource and health of ocean ecosystems will continue to be left to a few that have once again demonstrated failure to work together constructively and to act decisively.

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Humane Society International is the international arm of The Humane Society of the United States, the nation's largest animal protection organization — backed by 10.5 million Americans, or one of every 30. For more than a half-century, The HSUS has been fighting for the protection of all animals through advocacy, education, and hands-on programs. Celebrating animals and confronting cruelty — on the web at www.hsi.org.

Ocean Conservancy promotes healthy and diverse ocean ecosystems and opposes practices that threaten ocean life and human life. Through research, education, and science-based advocacy, Ocean Conservancy informs, inspires, and empowers people to speak and act on behalf of the oceans. In all its work, Ocean Conservancy strives to be the world's foremost advocate for the oceans. For more information, please visit: www.oceanconservancy.org.

Conservation International (CI) applies innovations in science, economics, policy and community participation to protect the Earth's richest regions of plant and animal diversity and demonstrate that human societies can live harmoniously with nature. Founded in 1987, CI works in more than 40 countries on four continents to help people find economic alternatives without harming their natural environments. For more information about CI, visit www.conservation.org.

For more than 45 years, WWF has been protecting the future of nature. The largest multinational conservation organization in the world, WWF works in 100 countries and is supported by 1.2 million members in the United States and close to 5 million globally. WWF's unique way of working combines global reach with a foundation in science, involves action at every level, from local to global, and ensures the delivery of innovative solutions that meet the needs of both people and nature. Go to www.worldwildlife.org to learn more.

The National Fisheries Institute (NFI) is the leading seafood industry advocate representing all aspects of the seafood community from water to table for over 60 years. For more information, please visit: www.aboutseafood.com.

The Billfish Foundation (TBF) is an international organization dedicated to the conservation of marlin, sailfish, spearfish and swordfish which comprise the apex predators of the ocean's pelagic ecosystems. With anglers and conservationist members in over 40 nations TBF has for over 20 years used research, education and advocacy to support the development of sustainable billfish management before national and international fisheries agencies and commissions. For more information, please visit www.billfish.org.

MarViva promotes the safeguarding and creation of marine protected areas in oceanic and coastal areas in Latin America. We provide support for the implementation of legislation protecting these areas, the enforcement of existing laws, and efforts to establish new reserves. Our overall aim is effective change toward a more sustainable use of coastal and marine resources. www.marvva.net.

The American Fishermen's Research Foundation (AFRF) for over 35 years supporting research and education concerning albacore tuna and related fish species. A unique organization funded supported and supported by troll and baitboat fishermen and those who buy their catch in the U.S. Canada, and New Zealand. www.afrf.org and www.albatuna.com.

The Western Fishboat Owners Association (WFOA) an organization of troll and baitboat albacore fishermen and their supporters bringing wild pacific albacore to consumers in a fully sustainable matter as endorsed by the Seafood Watch of NMFS which is the U.S. authority on marine fisheries science, conservation, and management. www.wfoa.org.

BirdLife International is a global Partnership of conservation organizations that strives to conserve birds, their habitats and global biodiversity. BirdLife Partners operate in over one hundred countries and territories worldwide. www.birdlife.org.