

Tuna fishing

A flag-waving squabble

Some quarters believe that action is needed to eliminate 'Flag of Convenience' tuna fishing vessels

Representatives of 128 Japanese tuna fishing boat companies have launched a campaign to end unregulated fishing for tuna in the oceans of the world. Under the acronym ATTACK (All Japan Tuna Boatowners Tactical Unit), the group is demanding that its government and trading companies ban imports of tuna from unregulated pirate tuna vessels.

Tuna, one of the world's most prized food fish, is currently being fished at, or over, the limits of sustainable use in most of the world's waters. To prevent overfishing, most tuna fishing nations have established regional tuna conservation organizations such as the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC), and have adopted regulations to prevent overfishing. At a global level, rules for sustainable tuna fishing practices were adopted through the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the UN Agreement on Straddling Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks.

Early this year, Japan took the lead in reducing tuna fishing effort by scrapping 20 per cent of its tuna fishing fleet, in response to the adoption by the 23rd FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) held in Rome in February 1999, of a Plan of Action for the management of fishing capacity. (Article 39 of the Plan states that States should take immediate steps to address the management of fishing capacity for international fisheries requiring urgent attention, with priority being given to those harvesting transboundary, straddling, highly migratory and high-seas stocks which are significantly overfished. Article 40 (3) further states that the required reduction would vary

from fishery to fishery; e.g. a 20-30 per cent reduction was mentioned for large-scale tuna longline fleets. Taiwan and the Republic of Korea also pledged to reduce their tuna fishing capacity over the next few years.

But some tuna fishing boatowners, unwilling to submit to regulations, fled their national jurisdictions and re-registered their vessels in countries that allowed them to operate like pirates, preying freely on tuna stocks, without regard to catch quotas or conservation measures agreed upon by members of regional or international conservation organizations. These pirate vessels, operating under 'flag of convenience' (FOC), now number around 240, and 80 per cent are Taiwanese-owned.

As Japan is the major market for high-quality sashimi grade tuna, ATTACK urged the Japanese government to deny Japanese markets to tuna caught by pirate vessels. In fact, almost all of tuna caught by FOC tuna fishing vessels are exported to Japan, currently around 47,000 tonnes a year, and almost 25 per cent of frozen tuna requirements are imported. Almost twice as many FOC tuna fishing vessels as the number of scrapped Japanese tuna fishing vessels are continuing their fishing even today.

Initiative needed

ATTACK insists that the pain and sacrifice that our fishermen and families as well as those related to the tuna fishing business have suffered from scrapping 132 tuna longline fishing vessels would be nullified if FOC vessels continue their pirate fishing. The group believes that Japan should take the initiative to eliminate FOC tuna vessels, and ban the trade of any tuna caught by FOC vessels. That would be the most effective measure to ensure sustainability

of tuna resources and tuna fisheries in the world. It has also demanded that Japanese trading companies stop buying tuna from pirate ships.

The problem of FOC fishing vessels is now a growing concern in the international community. The International Coalition of Fisheries Association (ICFA) discussed the problem at its annual meeting in Fremantle, Australia, during 9-11 November 1999. Members who participated came from Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Taiwan, the US and the ASEAN region. ICFA adopted a resolution requesting nations to refrain from dealing with FOC vessels and products, including denying port access, product transport, and trade and distribution. Further, ICFA urged the Government of Japan to take effective measures to prohibit the import of any tuna caught by FOC tuna fishing vessels. The resolution was delivered to the Government of Japan by an ICFA representative.

ICCAT also adopted the resolution to eliminate FOC fishing vessels at its 16th regular meeting held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during 15-22 November 1999, where 27 governments and EU participated. Each government is required to ensure that its fishing vessels do not engage in Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) tuna longline fishing activities. Trade of fish caught by IUU

vessels should also be refrained. Other measures were also included in the resolution. The important point is that the list of FOC tuna fishing vessels submitted by the US and Japan was formally acknowledged by ICCAT. The list is useful for every government to take appropriate measures.

Every effort should be continuously made until FOC tuna fishing vessels are completely eliminated from the ocean to ensure sustainability of the important marine resources for people throughout the world, both for present and future generations.

This appeal has been written by Yuichiro Harada, Staff Officer, International Division, Federation of Japan Tuna Fisheries Co-operative Associations, with the assistance of Alan Macnow, Telepress Associates, Inc