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FOR CONSERVATION AND SUSTAINABLE USE OF TUNAS

OPRT Interview

New OPRT president determined to promote responsible tuna fisheries through action-first approach

Toshiro Shirasu, elected new OPRT president last October, is determined to further promote the activities of the organization. OPRT is joined by all the stakeholders for tuna, including producers as well as traders, distributors and consumer organizations. As the first step of his career as the OPRT head, Shirasu said he ventured into his kitchen to challenge how to develop tasty way of eating tunas. We interviewed the active new president about his perception of OPRT activities and his hopes for the future.

<Put responsible tuna fisheries into practice on private level>

Q: What prospect did you obtain for OPRT after you became president?

SHIRASU: Tuna fishing organizations from nine countries—or about 90% of all the large-scale tuna longline fishing vessels in the world—are members of OPRT. I suppose there are no other organizations in the world that cover a single fishing method so extensively. Their participation is not limited to being members alone. Strict arrangements have been agreed among members not to increase the number of vessels in order to realize sustainable use of tuna resources. This represents the fact that tuna longline fishers in the world have a serious desire for conservation of robust tuna resources and sound development of tuna fisheries and markets. I have renewed my recognition of the significance of those goals of OPRT as a private-level voluntary organization.

Negotiations for international tuna resource management are carried out by the governments. But it actually takes enormous amount of time when some arrangements are to be made among governments. It is therefore crucial for producers, distributors and consumers to approach the issue of tuna seriously, not merely depending on governments but rather positively backing up their efforts. In this regard, activities of OPRT is very important in maintaining the tuna resources in a healthy state, ensuring continuation of fisheries and making it possible that tunas will be consumed for many years to come.

<The value of tuna rediscovered>

Q: Recently, there has been a concern about

decline in consumption of seafood among the Japanese. What about tunas?

SHIRASU: When Japan is seen as a whole, it may be true to say that the presence of fish, including tunas, is diminishing in the Japanese

food life. Tunas still enjoy high popularity, but the number of consumers who do not know the true value of tunas may be increasing. I also have to reflect upon my lack of knowledge. After studying about tunas, I came to know for the first time that the tuna has a greater proportion of protein than livestock meat. Thus I rediscovered the excellence of tuna as a food. Moreover, as the tuna has abundant amount of calcium which prevents high blood pressures and vitamin D effective in controlling osteoporosis, it is not only tasty but also contributes greatly to maintaining our health.

People in the world became aware of the value of not only tunas but other fish as food, and consumption of fish is growing rapidly throughout the world. Such trend may affect the Japanese consumers to review the value of tunas and other fish all over again.

<Atlantic bluefin tuna and CITES>



Q: What are you thinking about the future activities of OPRT?

SHIRASU: One of the most immediate issues is the proposal to be discussed in the meeting of Conference of Parties of CITES (the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Fauna and Flora) to be held in March this year.

The listing proposal of Atlantic bluefin tuna in CITES Appendix will be discussed in the coming meeting. But in light of the criteria CITES has established for itself, it is highly questionable that the Atlantic bluefin tuna should be designated as an endangered species. Moreover, the species is now being managed by ICCAT (the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas), a specialized international tuna management organization. Tunas are the resources that can be used sustainably if they are properly managed and such efforts are being made by regional tuna fisheries management organizations. It is inappropriate to ban the international trade in tunas without legitimate and objective ground.

In November last year, ICCAT resolved on implementation of rigorous regulatory measures, making it clear that member States will do their utmost in promoting recovery of the Atlantic bluefin tuna resources. We are concerned that, if the Atlantic bluefin tuna is included in CITES Appendix without legitimate and objective reason, then the tunas in other areas of the world oceans could be subject to similar prohibition of trade. In order to avert this situation, ICCAT and its parties should appeal the international community on the importance of their commitment to the rigorous regulatory measures adopted last November. There are many other issues surrounding tunas, such as control of excessive fishing capacity—and some of them cannot be solved easily. In face of these problems, I would like to go ahead with OPRT activities programs on action-first basis in the hope to ensure, together with tuna producers, distributors and consumers, sustainable use of these limited but global-scale natural resources in responsible manner.

Tuna management organizations

ICCAT demonstrates its capability as a responsible tuna resource management organization

--"effective" measures for resource recovery also agreed by consensus--

ICCAT decided to substantially reduce the overall annual quota of the Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna for 2010 to 13,500 tons at its general meeting held in Recife, Brazil, November 11-15, 2009. This

represented a reduction of about 40% from the 2009 quota of 22,000 tons.

At this year's meeting, attention was focused on how far the decision of ICCAT, as an international resource management organization, can prove its capability to manage the Atlantic bluefin tuna, amid the current circumstances surrounding this species. Monaco has proposed Appendix I listing of Atlantic bluefin tuna at the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) with a view to enforce a total ban of international trade for this stock.

For the years in 2011 and afterwards, the Commission will establish quotas based on the results of stock assessment by its Scientific Committee. At the same time, it also incorporated in its decisions the option of totally banning fishing in 2011 in case the Scientific Committee recognized that there is a danger of the collapse of the stock (i.e. a situation extremely difficult for the stock to recover.) Thus, ICCAT has strongly set out its stance to implement its resource management thoroughly as a tuna resource management organization.

A high-ranking official of the Fisheries Agency of Japan gave a positive evaluation to the results of the ICCAT meeting. He said that "a consensus was formed among Member States on reduction of the quota in a way to bring a bit further the recommendation of the Scientific Committee, which called for a quota reduction to a level below 15,000 tons a year."

Besides a 40% quota cutback for 2010, ICCAT specifically agreed to shorten the purse-seine fishing season in the Mediterranean to one month (from May 16 to June 14) from the current season covering a period from April 16 to June 14. Further, the Commission agreed that each Member State should curtail their fishing capacity to meet their national total allowable catch (TAC) by 2013.

ICCAT further took note that it will hold an intersessional meeting before the start of next year's season in May, and it would check the state of compliance with the resource management measures by the Member States, and, in case those measures were not complied with, it could take further quota reductions. Thus the Commission incorporated the requirement to reinforce its management framework to have its agreement thoroughly observed.

Regarding conservation and management measures for Western Atlantic bluefin tuna, ICCAT agreed that measures adopted last year will be maintained. It also agreed that quotas for bigeye tuna and swordfish will be kept at the level as in previous years. (This article was reprinted from the ISARIBI No.65, an English-language newsletter of the Japan Fisheries Association, published in December 2009.)

Moves of other tuna RFMOs

Regional tuna fisheries management organizations, responsible for conservation and management of tuna resources, are now making all-out efforts to ensure sustainability of tuna resources. Given below is an overview

of the recent moves of some of those organizations.

WCPFC: to tighten regulations on Pacific bluefin and bigeye tunas

At its sixth annual meeting held in Papeete, French Polynesia, December 6-11, 2009, the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) decided on conservation and management measures not to increase fishing mortality for the Pacific bluefin tuna from the current level. The Commission also decided to tighten inspection at major landing ports, such as Bangkok, and control of catch transshipment in order to ensure thorough enforcement of regulations for bigeye tunas.

Regarding bluefin tuna, the WCPFC decided to establish a working group on management, with the participation of Mexico that engages in tuna farming along the Eastern Pacific coast.

As for conservation and management measures for bigeye tuna, it confirmed that it would continue the management measures adopted last year (i.e. 30% cutback in catch volume over three years from 2009), and decided that it would make a thorough review of the measures at the next annual meeting in December 2010 with the aim to ensure its effectiveness.

CCSBT: to curtail catch quota for southern bluefin tuna

At its annual meeting, held in Cheju Island, the Republic of Korea from October 20 last year, the Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) decided to reduce the overall quota for southern bluefin tuna by 20% over two years from 2010 (9,449 tons x 2 years).

This decision was made on the basis of the Scientific Committee's recommendation that "there is a concern of decline of the resources under the present situation, and there is a need for catch reduction to ensure recovery."

Tuna science

The theory of 60-year cycle in fish population dynamics

— What about the case of tunas?

Dr. Ziro Suzuki
Tuna Scientist

Recently, Russian researchers made public that there is a cycle in the increase and decrease of fish population at an interval of nearly 60 years for all fish species, based on the examination of population dynamics of species such as sardines, salmon, cod and herring. It has been already known, through studies by Dr.

Kawasaki, former professor of the Tohoku University, that there is a cycle in sardine population dynamics.

What is remarkable in the studies by the Russian researchers is that large-scale climate changes and the sardine population dynamics are compared for a span of several thousands of years, and that they showed that the trend of changes of the two factors have accurately synchronized.

In the absence of data from climatic observation and fisheries, how was it possible to know about massive climate changes and sardine population dynamics from several thousand years ago? As indicators for climate changes, the Russian researchers analyzed the ice layers in Greenland, which have accumulated over 1,500 years, and the growth rings of pines which grew in the Sierra Nevada mountain system in California. As for sardine population dynamics, they analyzed the amount of scales deposited, without being dissolved, in the anaerobic layers off California over nearly 2,000 years. Based on the results of the analysis, they clarified the correlation between the climate changes and sardine population dynamics.

The researchers pointed out that the 60-year cycle corresponds to the rise and decline periods of the earth's superficial layer temperatures, and the population of some groups of fish species increases during the rise period while other groups show a contrary trend. They went on to note that that natural changes impact to a greater extent to this phenomenon than fisheries.

Unfortunately, the Russian studies do not mention about tunas. But there are results of studies by French researchers who analyzed the set-net catch data of the Mediterranean bluefin tuna for over several hundreds of years, and reported that there is a 120-year cycle. Their paper also showed that there are correlations between the population increase phase and the water temperature declining period. By analyzing their research results more in detail, we may arrive at the 60-year cycle.

Meanwhile, the Institute of Far Seas Fisheries in Japan has just started studies on the large-scale long-term changes in the catch (volume) of the Pacific bluefin tuna. If the 120-year cycle is plausible, it seems that the Mediterranean bluefin tuna is now in the increasing phase because the last increasing period started around 120 year ago. The decreasing trend of bluefin tuna population has now become a serious issue in the Mediterranean. However, it could be said that this long term cycle is partly playing the role in supporting the large catch of 30,000 - 50,000 tons of bluefin tuna in the past several decades in the Mediterranean.

I am interested in further researches about whether there exists a cycle for population dynamics of the Pacific bluefin tuna that is largely controlled by natural factors rather than fishing targeting bluefin tuna. It is my opinion that wild fish populations are changing always dynamically and such an assumption as equilibrium condition (stable condition of population without any changes) before fishing occurs is unrealistic and attempting to control any fish stocks without taking into account role of natural factors does not work.

Editorial

Raison d'etre of a tuna fisheries management body to be put to test at CITES COP15

The results of the coming meeting of the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of CITES to be held next month in Doha, Qatar, can significantly impact the future course not merely of ICCAT but also of all the tuna fisheries management organizations. The reason to think so is that the possibility may be opened that management measures, decided by a certain regional tuna fisheries management organization which is a specialized body for conservation and management of tuna resources, are declared invalid by another organization. If the proposal to list the Atlantic bluefin tuna on CITES Appendix I is adopted at COP15, then bluefin tuna farming in the Mediterranean will virtually find itself unable to survive. Further, rigorous management measures to ensure recovery of Atlantic bluefin tuna resources, adopted at the ICCAT annual meeting last November, will be rendered void of substance.

The trade ban for Atlantic bluefin tuna came up in the agenda of CITES, an international organization whose objective is to protect endangered species of wild fauna and flora, because, as has been made clear in the report of the independent panel to review ICCAT's performance, the conservation and management measures, recommended by ICCAT, have not been fully complied with by the ICCAT Member States who should bear the responsibility for their implementation. In other words, ICCAT is said to be reaping what it sowed.

As if to wipe out the consequences of their own doing, ICCAT and its Member States, at the November annual meeting, took a serious view of the recommendation of the ICCAT Scientific Committee which called to restrain the overall allocations of the Atlantic bluefin tuna to 15,000 tons or less. And they decided to curtail the 2010 overall quota of Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna by 40% to 13,500 tons. On top of that, they also decided on concrete steps to ensure the effectiveness of the measures, including those to reduce the fleet capacity with the aim to substantially improve monitoring and control.

If the implementation of those management measures, adopted by ICCAT, are observed in earnest, it is expected that the recovery of the Eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna will be on a track to recovery. Therefore, before deciding on the measure to ban international trade in the Atlantic bluefin tuna at CITES, the international community should first respect the determination toward recovery of the resources by ICCAT and its Member States, as clarified at the ICCAT annual meeting, and watch whether the management measures would be implemented accordingly.

On the other hand, it is often felt that the perspective on the importance of fisheries is missing in the discussion

over the issue of inclusion of the Atlantic bluefin tuna in CITES Appendix at COP15. It is clearly stated in the introduction of "the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries," that "fisheries provide a vital source of food, employment, recreation, trade and economic being for people throughout the world, both for present and future generations." Thus, social and economic contributions of fisheries are great, and the Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery is no exception. Moreover, there are very many stakeholders to this fishery—countries, organizations and individuals alike. Therefore, an objective and reasonable ground should exist in the decision which could deny the continued existence of such an important fishery. This is not an issue to be decided with lighthearted perception. The ICCAT Scientific Committee has recommended reduction of catch volume of the Atlantic bluefin tuna but has not recognized the species as being endangered. To pursue a total ban of international trade is obviously too impetuous. We should not decide on the introduction of the international ban on trade in Atlantic bluefin tuna if we think of the prospect that this fishery will most certainly go out of existence when such a ban is actually enforced.

What is needed at the moment is to confirm the process of implementation of the comprehensive and multiple measures that ICCAT has decided for the recovery of the resources, as stated in the foregoing. The international community should rather back up the efforts ICCAT is now promoting to make itself function as an effective tuna resource conservation and management organization. It is premature to brand it merely as an incompetent management body.

Topic

Bluefin tuna prices on a constant decline in Japan

It is anticipated that the pace of decrease in supply of high-grade tuna to Japan's sashimi market may be accelerated if catch regulations at ICCAT and the CCSBT are tightened, but, in reality, tuna prices in the Japanese market have rather been on a steady downturn. In the background of the decline one can point to shrinking demand in the country due to the protracted economic recession.

According a distribution industry source, restaurants and other eateries are now refraining from using high-priced bluefin tuna, and, as a result, the bluefin tuna inventory in Japan is said to have piled up to the level equivalent to the amount for one and half years. In point of fact, the wholesale prices of frozen bluefin tuna in last December plunged to 1,413 yen per kg, which was nearly 70% of that in the same period of the preceding year.

On the other hand, full-cycle bluefin tuna farming has been promoted actively in Japan, based on the prospect for decreasing supply in the years ahead. Maruha Nichiro Holdings, Inc., Japan's largest fishing company, is aiming to achieve the first shipment of its full-cycle farmed bluefin tuna during fiscal 2013 (April 2013-March 2014).