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Europe backs ban on tuna fishing as bluefin comes under threat



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Sushi lovers may have to find another favourite fish dish after plans for a worldwide ban on bluefin tuna fishing were backed by the European Commission yesterday.

The bluefin is a highly prized delicacy, particularly in Japan, where one specimen can fetch £60,000, but spiralling demand has led to the near exhaustion of stocks, resulting in moves to place it on a list of the world's most endangered species.

European ministers will make a decision on the issue this year, but are expected to back calls for the fish to be fully protected for two years to allow stocks to recover. A final decision on a ban will be made by ministers after a survey of stocks in November under a compromise agreement between the environment and fisheries departments of the European Commission.

"This decision marks an important step in the protection of Atlantic bluefin tuna," said Stavros Dimas, the Environment Commissioner. "We must act on the best scientific evidence available to us — and scientists say that urgent action is needed to safeguard the future of one of the ocean's most emblematic creatures."

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The Commission's recommendations will be put before a meeting of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites) next March. It is understood that Joe Borg, the Fisheries Commissioner, from Malta, is opposed to a complete ban; along with Spain and Italy, Malta is one of the main centres for bluefin fishing and it has reportedly been lobbying for a

continuation of the trade under carefully monitored conditions. Mr Borg said: "It will be very important to see what the latest scientific advice says."

The Commission has a two-month season in which six countries are permitted to fish with industrial purse seine nets in the Mediterranean and east Atlantic: Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain. Campaigners claim that stocks have been depleted to the extent where there has been a noticeable fall in the average weight of those remaining. Tony Long, director of the WWF's European policy office, said that Atlantic bluefin tuna were under threat. "Some member states have already joined the call to temporarily ban international trade in Atlantic bluefin and WWF now urges other countries to follow the European Commission's lead."

Willie Mackenzie, of Greenpeace, said: "Bluefin tuna populations have fallen to critically low levels." This was due to "disgraceful fisheries management" by the Commission. "Today's move doesn't mean that this fish is saved yet. Member states still need to agree to support this ban, and follow the lead of countries like the UK."

A fishermen's association representing fleets from Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain said that the proposed ban was nonsense.

The Japanese, who import 80 per cent of the bluefin tuna caught in the Mediterranean, have been expecting a ban for some time. Noriyuki Miguchi, an official from the Japanese Fisheries Agency, confirmed yesterday that Japan was opposed to a ban.