

Sport Fishing of Atlantic Bluefin Tuna

North Harris Trust Position Statement



Position

1. Harris' fishing industry is important for the local economy and culture, providing employment to people throughout the island community.
2. The North Harris Trust (NHT) is concerned about the near threatened *Thunnus thynnus* Atlantic Bluefin Tuna (ABT) population in the Eastern Atlantic and how fishing for sport from the island of Harris might impact its future. Particularly, in the context of the additional pressures facing ABT populations, such as the limited prey abundance, rising pollution levels and increasing sea temperatures.
3. The NHT is concerned how increased fishing pressure on a top predator such as ABT will impact upon local ecosystem dynamics including the protected UNESCO world heritage site, St. Kilda.

Policy context and history of this issue¹

Fishing of the eastern ABT is first documented at the beginning of the 1960s but expanded to industrial levels at the beginning of the 1990s seeing a large but not detrimental reduction in the species population.

In 1998 quotas were set for the fish, but illegal fishing and the rise in meat price and demand reached a peak in 2007 when the population level was at 60% of the estimated abundance in 1970. The population has not yet recovered.

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) and governing bodies implemented stricter quotas in 2010, however, they failed to introduce a reduction to fishing fleets. This saw continued fishing until 2011 where the International Union of Conservation of Nature (IUCN) registered the ABT as endangered; later changing to near threatened in 2015.

The 2020 quota for the Eastern Atlantic population of ABT was a total of 36,000 tonnes for Norway, Iceland, the UK and all EU member states. Fishing for sport does not add to this quota or the registered catch of any vessels involved, however, licences are required and tonnage may be set aside for this purpose.

¹ (<https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/fact-sheets/2013/10/08/the-story-of-atlantic-bluefin-tuna>) (<https://www.msc.org/species/tuna/recent-history-of-bluefin-tuna>)

Relevance to the North Harris Trust

1. The first object for which the NHT was established is 'to take all appropriate measures to conserve the natural heritage'². The natural heritage is understood to include all species native to the Western Isles both on land and at sea; the varied array of habitats upon which these species depend; and the ecosystem dynamics through which all local populations interact.
2. The NHT recognises and supports the fishing industry on Harris, including the vital contribution to the local economy and culture. Safeguarding the health of wild marine populations is crucial to this industry's long-term viability, providing fish for our community into the future. By allowing the full recovery of an influential species, such as ABT, we maximise the positive impact on marine productivity it generates, so contributing towards marine abundance for future generations.
3. The NHT has concerns about how targeting ABT, for sport or otherwise, can impact other species in the ecosystem. There is an immediate link in how ABT feeding behaviour provides an opportunity for sea birds to hunt effectively, including designated species such as white-tailed eagles.

Current Plans

The Eastern Atlantic population has begun to rise according to ICCAT, and there have been an increasing number of sightings off the west coasts of Ireland and Scotland in recent years. This has been advertised as a potential avenue to exploit rather than a conservation success story and has generated interest in those wishing to claim to have fought this rare and unique species.

Over the past two years, ABT have been caught and tagged in waters off the coast of Harris. In doing so, means of capture has been proven, and important population location data has been gathered. This is openly promoted as the beginning of a process that will allow sport fishing off the coast of Harris in the near future.

Statement

The North Harris Trust does not support Atlantic Bluefin Tuna Sport Fishing from the Western Isles. Whilst we appreciate that there is niche demand for sport fishing, the economic benefits to the islands from developing this sector are deemed to be limited. It is, therefore, the North Harris Trust position that these perceived benefits do not justify the targeting of this unique apex marine predator or the related damage to our natural heritage.

Approved by the North Harris Trust board on 14th June 2021.

² The North Harris Trust Memorandum of Association.