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Editorial | Island Voices

Hawaii's commercial fishery a good steward of the ocean

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Posted August 10, 2016

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Hawaii's longline fishery provides substantial benefits to Hawaii seafood markets and is not overfishing the ocean. It catches around 4 percent of the bigeye tuna, less than 0.01 percent of yellowfin tuna, and less than 0.3 percent of the total tuna caught in the Pacific.

In regards to the fishery and its arrangements to fish bigeye tuna allocated to three U.S. Participating Territories of the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC): The three territories — Guam, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and American Samoa — have an unlimited allocation of bigeye tuna under the WCPFC conservation and management measure, being classified as a developing small island state or territory.

The U.S., in the form of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, unilaterally capped the territory allocations at 2,000 metric tons (mt), of which 1,000 mt could be transferred to a U.S. fishing entity. The transfer is entirely transparent and any transfers are reported to the WCPFC by territories engaging in this process.

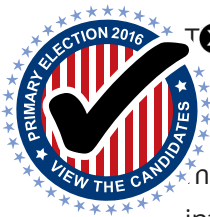
The WCPFC, moreover, acknowledges and does not prohibit the transfers. The Council conducted extensive analyses of the impact of the transfers of bigeye tuna from the territories to the Hawaii longline fishery and found them to be consistent with the conservation objectives of the WCPFC. This documentation is publicly available from the Council or NMFS and is subject to public rule-making, which provides an opportunity for public comment.

In a July 28 commentary (“Overfishing our seas hurts local fishers and our oceans,” Island Voices, Star-Advertiser), Todd Steiner claimed that shutting down the longline fishery would be a boon to the small-scale troll and handline fisheries which is in part true — but these fisheries alone are unable to meet the seafood demand of Hawaii’s population. During a 40-day Hawaii longline fishery closure in 2010, retail prices for ahi reached in excess of \$25 per pound — not a boon for Hawaii’s seafood consumers.

While there is indeed a collateral bycatch of protected species by the longline fishery of sea turtles, sea birds and cetaceans, the Hawaii fishery has reduced its sea turtle and seabird interactions by more than 90 percent. Further, it is subject to a stringent set of rules for interactions with false killer whales, including the use of “weak” hooks and a partial closure of the U.S. EEZ (exclusive economic zone) around the main Hawaiian islands. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration evaluates the Hawaii longline fishery for consistency with the Endangered Species Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act and other applicable laws, and finds that the fishery does not threaten the continued existence of any marine species.

Moreover, well-documented research by the National Marine Fisheries Service has shown that the Hawaii longline fishery has achieved a 50 percent reduction in the bycatch mortality of sharks, for which there is little to no market demand in Hawaii. Finally, the successful methods adopted by the Hawaii longline fleet have become the global standard for other longline fleets by other tuna commissions, with the Hawaii interaction rates being used as benchmarks against which other fleets are evaluated.

The single biggest bang for the conservation buck is to protect turtles where they are concentrated, either on nesting beaches or foraging grounds.



The Western Pacific Council has put a great deal of time and effort into supporting a range of conservation projects for endangered sea turtles in Japan, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Baja California for over 10 years, and continues to do so. The Council manages this fishery sustainably while providing for optimum yield consistent with international and domestic requirements.

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