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NATURE

Tuna Being Plucked From Oceans at Unsustainable Rates, Researchers Say

By Ron Brackett · 2 days ago · weather.com



Pacific bluefin tuna are considered overfished.
(NOAA Fisheries)

At a Glance

- The amount of tuna caught has increased 1,000% over the past six decades.
- Industrial fisheries are pulling 6.6 million tons of tuna from the seas annually.
- The fisheries are operating substantially over capacity, the study says.

The amount of tuna pulled from the oceans has increased 1,000% over the past 60 years, making existing levels of tuna fishing unsustainable, according to a new study.

The study, published in the Fisheries Research journal, looked at larger industrial catches and found they are pulling 6.6 million tons of tuna from the seas annually.

“Tuna fisheries have expanded into every region that we can possibly exploit. There are no new fishing grounds to explore and we are catching fish at the highest rate we can,” lead author Angie Coulter, a researcher with the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia, told The Guardian.

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The researchers pulled together data from 1950 to 2016 from five regional fisheries management organizations to create a global look at tuna fishing.

In the '50s, catches were largely concentrated off the coasts of North and Central America in the Eastern Pacific Ocean and around the Western Pacific Islands. By the 1980s, tuna fisheries had spread around the globe along the equator and into temperate areas in most oceans.

Now industrial fisheries are harvesting tuna from every tropical and subtropical region in the world, the study said.

About 70% of tuna catches are made in the Pacific Ocean, the researchers found, with 12% made in the Atlantic and 12% in the Indian Ocean.

"Everywhere tuna swim, they're being pursued by industrial fisheries," Shana Miller, who directs the Global Tuna Conservation Project at the Ocean Foundation and was not involved in the new study, told NPR. "That's a major take from this paper."

The fisheries are operating substantially over capacity, according to a news release about the study.

The fisheries have exploited or over-exploited tuna and other large fish species and spread out so much, no new fishing grounds remain to be explored, the release said.

"The continuation of tuna fisheries' catch, employment numbers and revenue figures at levels similar to the present day depends on the long-term sustainable management of the fisheries and fleets exploiting these stocks and ecosystems, and the cooperation of more than 100 countries engaged in tuna fisheries," Coulter said in the release.

(MORE: Mercury Levels Rising in Fish Because of Climate Change, Overfishing)

The study found that skipjack and yellowfin are the most commonly caught species of tuna. Skipjack, the type of tuna typically found in cans, makes up 49% of the global catch. Yellowfin is 22% of the catch, while bigeye tuna and albacore tuna make up 10% and 9% of total global catches, respectively.

The researchers noted that catches of bluefin tuna, the fish prized by sushi makers, have plummeted since the 1950s, when bluefin and albacore represented the majority of catches.

For example, the Southern bluefin tuna, which is critically endangered, makes up less than 1% of the catch in the Indian Ocean.

The study also showed the extent that other species, especially sharks, become collateral damage in tuna fishing.

The study estimated 6 million tons of different shark species were discarded between 1950 and 2016 in the Pacific Ocean alone.

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