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Amid talk of extinction, Japan's 'king of fish' nets EUR12,500 per tuna

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On a gloomy day pregnant with rain and the weight of past expectations, tuna fisherman Minoru Nakamura is welcomed back to port by his family in Ishiki like a conquering hero.

Three generations wait onshore, including Nakamura's father Toshiaki and newborn child Misaki, as his boat sails into harbour. On this remote island off southern Japan, where rusting boats wait for fishermen who increasingly stay at home, few sights excite more than Nakamura's precious cargo: a 172kg (380lb) bluefin tuna, splayed across the deck of his small trawler.

Nakamura has been dubbed Japan's King of Fish. At peak prices, his single catch will fetch over 1.5m yen, (EUR12,500) at the world's biggest fish market in Tsukiji, Tokyo. By the time it is carved up and sold as thousands of sushi, sashimi and steak cuts to restaurants across the capital, it will be worth at least three times that much - the price of a luxury family car.

But among many of Ishiki's 32,000 population, one-in-eight of whom depend on the sea to survive, the talk now is of one thing: the extinction of their livelihood. "In 40 years on a boat, I've never seen it so bad," says one inhabitant, Yoshiju Kukeya. "Nakamura-san is lucky today. The fish are not there any more."

Atsushi Sasaki, 61, a fisherman turned conservationist who is sounding the alarm bell increasingly desperately about Japan's and the world's free-falling tuna stocks, speaks of imminent extinction: "If the situation continues, it is inevitable that tuna will disappear from the seas."

A string of doomsday predictions about the fate of the Pacific tuna led Japan's largest fisheries cooperative this summer to announce an unprecedented suspension of operations. This week, an international preservation group meeting in Morocco warned that once-teeming stocks of bluefin tuna in the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean have plummeted by 90% and may shortly be put on the official endangered list. Most of the blame has been heaped on Japan, which consumes about three-quarters of the world's bluefin, according to Greenpeace, and increasingly imports what it cannot catch (currently about 44,000 tonnes a year).

Until 30 years ago, tuna was considered so worthless by many trawlers that it was thrown back into the sea or processed for cat food.

Nowadays, rocketing prices mean it has attracted the attention of Italian and Russian mafia, who control much of the Mediterranean trade, according to **Daniel Pauly**, one of the world's top fisheries experts. "Most Japanese people have no idea where their tuna is coming from," he says. "If they did, they might eat a lot less."

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