

Bluefin tuna and Pew, here we go again!

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On August 13, 1997 Josh Reichert, then Director of the Pew Trusts Environment Program and now Executive Vice President of the Trusts, in an op-ed column in the Philadelphia Inquirer titled ***Swordfish technique depletes the swordfish population*** wrote *"the root problem is not only the size of the (swordfish) quota, the length of the season, or the number of vessels involved. It is how the fish are caught.... Use of longlines must be barred.... the fishery should be open to all - provided that swordfish are caught with hand gear, including harpoons and rod and reel. No swordfish should be taken until it has a chance to breed at least once, meaning that the minimum allowable catch size should be no less than 100 pounds. Such measures.... would put the Atlantic swordfish population back on the road to recovery."* http://articles.philly.com/1997-08-13/news/25567968_1_swordfish-big-fish-commercial-long-liners

In what has become typical Pew style, Mr. Reichert's article was just a small piece of a frightfully well-funded campaign to "save the swordfish" from the depredations of the U.S. pelagic longline fleet. Involving scientists who had been willing riders on the Pew funding gravy train, enlisting restaurateurs into the campaign who hadn't the foggiest idea what swordfishing or pelagic longlining was all about, and using the formidable Pew media machine which had earned its legitimacy with tens of millions of dollars in grants to journalism schools and broadcast outlets, Mr. Reichert and his minions set out to destroy an entire fishery and the lives of the thousands of hard working Americans who depended on it.

This could have dealt a devastating blow to the U.S. longline fleet. Exacerbating a bad situation, it would have also resulted in the transfer of the uncaught quota from the strictly regulated U.S. boats to other vessels whose regulation was much less rigorous. Without question removal of the U.S. longline fleet would have had a negative impact on swordfish conservation.

Fortunately a swordfish management program to reduce fishing effort to where it was in balance with the resource had been put in place by the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) years before Mr. Reichert and Pew "discovered" swordfish. By the time the Pew people and the Pew dollars entered the fray this program was already paying obvious conservation dividends. Then a closure of swordfish nursery areas off Florida, a closure which was supported by the U.S. longline fleet, was also put in place. This assured the recovery of the swordfish stock in the Western North Atlantic.

This was a testament to fisheries management based on sound science, not on media hype only affordable by multi-billion dollar corporations and foundations. In spite of self-serving claims to the contrary, the Pew peoples' prodigious yet misguided efforts to scuttle the pelagic longline fleet – and their obvious lack of understanding of swordfish management – changed virtually nothing about the fishery or about how it was being managed.

But what has changed in the intervening years is the way in which the rest of the (non-Pew) world looks at pelagic longlining in general and the U.S. pelagic longline fleet in particular. Thanks to significant efforts by the U.S. participants in this fishery, they have become the undisputed world leaders in developing and implementing fishing gear and fishing techniques to drastically reduce or eliminate the incidence of bycatch in their fishery. And despite Mr. Reichert's dire predictions and those of Pew's stable of scientists, the doom and gloom predicted for swordfish if longlining was allowed to continue never developed. Today, as the pelagic longline fishery continues, the swordfish stock is fully rebuilt. In

fact, the fishery is in such good shape that it was recently certified as sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council.

So now Bluefin tuna

To quote the inimitable Yogi Berra, “*it’s déjà vu all over again.*” Fifteen years later the same cast of characters and the same organizations are using the same tired and ineffective strategy funded by the same sources to derail the management of another highly migratory fish species, the Atlantic bluefin tuna (ABT).

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the same body that is responsible for swordfish management in the Atlantic, is holding a meeting of fisheries scientists and managers in Montreal at the end of this month to review the ABT stock assessment. The outcome of this review will have much to do with determining what the total allowable catch (TAC) of these valuable fish will be in the coming years. The TAC is divided between recreational fishermen, rod and reel commercial fishermen, harpooners, purse seiners (currently none are in the U.S. fishery) and pelagic longliners (who don’t target ABT but do take some incidentally).

While the public’s view of the value of these fish has been purposely distorted – each year one fish, supposedly the first and the best of the year, is sold at a Japanese auction for hundreds of thousands of dollars as a marketing ploy – they are valuable, with a prime fish bringing thousands of dollars (the National Geographic Channel offers a largely accurate portrayal of the rod and reel ABT fishery in its series *Wicked Tuna*).

In what is no surprise to anyone with even a nodding acquaintance with fisheries management issues, the folks at Pew have mounted yet another well-funded campaign to influence the outcome of this ICCAT assessment review. They are using the same flashy and expensive techniques and have enlisted a similar clique of experts to “save the tuna” as they used in the late 90’s to save the swordfish.

As was so convincingly demonstrated by the complete recovery of the swordfish stocks in spite of continued harvesting by the longline fleet, Pew science as voiced by Pew scientists was then far from the last word in the world of fisheries management. That hasn’t changed. Nor has their strategy. The same hackneyed messages of doom and gloom by the same overwrought scientists are presented as if they represent the main stream of fisheries research.

Rather than being swayed by their efforts to make the playing field at the upcoming meeting in Montreal as uneven as the billions of dollars backing them up will allow, it’s crucial that the independent science as espoused by the independent scientists speak for itself.

As with swordfish almost a generation ago, we trust that the scientists and managers in Montreal this week will not be swayed by all of the hyperbole that they will find aimed directly at them, will evaluate the existing science for what it is, not for what the Pew people will try to tell them it is, and make decisions that are right for the fish and right for the fishermen.

We should note here that there seems to be no limit to what the people at the Pew Trusts will spend in their attempts to convince anyone who will listen to reduce or eliminate fishing but when it comes to investing even negligible resources into efforts to more accurately and extensively sample the fish stocks they seem so intent on saving, something that everyone agrees is necessary for more effective management, they seem singularly uninterested.