

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode 1: *Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/red-gold-the-managed-extinction-of-the-giant-bluefin-tuna>

Host introduction: [*Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*](#)

, is a book that asks why so many big bluefin tuna have vanished from the Atlantic Ocean. Author Jennifer Telesca notes that the term "red gold" has emerged out of the exorbitant price her ruby-colored flesh commands on the global market. For reference, in January 2019, a 613-pound Pacific bluefin tuna sold at market in Tokyo for an astounding record of \$3.1 million U.S. dollars. To research this book, Telesca gained unparalleled access to the [International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas](#), also known as ICCAT, to show that the institution has faithfully executed the task assigned to it by international law to fish as hard as possible to grow national economies. This interview between Telesca and [editor Jason Weidemann](#) was recorded in May 2020 and has been edited for length.

Jason Weidemann: Good morning, Jen. How are you doing today?

Jennifer Telesca: I'm doing OK.

JW: Good. My name is Jason Weidemann. I'm editorial director at the University of Minnesota Press. And I am speaking today with Jennifer Telesca, and we are talking about her book. It was just published by the University of Minnesota Press. I was fortunate enough to be the acquiring editor. It's called *Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*. Jennifer, thanks for jumping on and having a conversation with me about this book.

JT: Thanks for having me, Jason.

JW: First of all, how are you doing? It's mid-May. We're in the middle of a pandemic. Are you doing OK?

JT: I'm doing OK. Brooklyn is doing OK.

JW: Good. Well, congratulations on the book. It's been out for a few weeks now. How does it feel to have a book out in the world at this time?

JT: Well, you know, I have to say, it is a beautiful book. You know, it's extraordinary to feel 10 years of my life effectively collapsed into 300 pages.

JW: The cover image for the book is beautiful. I think what strikes me about it is just how close I feel to this image of a giant bluefin tuna sort of staring back out at me.

JT: Yeah, can we talk about that for a minute? Because I want to acknowledge the way in which the cover image is the argument of the book writ small. It's that feeling that the bluefin or any fish, any sea creature looks you in the eye. But you also see fading in the distance, these sort of ghosts of disappearing, vanishing fish as well. I was joking around with my friends that I had this fantasy that some fisheries expert or dilettante was going to ask me this question in public (but, you know, clearly, we can't have any public events right now). And that's, you know, and saying [in a public event] that "Oh, but you know that that stripe that appears from her nose through her eye, that doesn't actually exist on a bluefin. So, this is actually not a fair representation of what a bluefin looks like." So, I have this fantasy that someone's going to ask me this question so that I can respond by saying, "Well, actually, that's only if you're looking at the bluefin objectively. If you think of the image as the viewer is reflected back on to the image, what's reflected back on to the fish is that stripe of gold."

JW: Ah, I see. So, it's something that's been imposed on the fish.

JT: Written in the way that, that we have to remember that we're a part of the frame, and once we recognize our own subjective involvement in the image, we have to be able to account for that mirrored reflection of gold. When I saw the image originally, when it was sent to me, I thought that it was a photograph. And then I learned that actually, it was a detail of a painting. And the painting is by an artist who, after serving in World War II, taught painting at Pratt —

JW: Oh, wow.

JT: — which is the [Pratt Institute](#), which is where I'm currently working.

JW: That's amazing. Well, let's talk a little bit about bluefin tuna because your book is focused on the bluefin tuna. There are other kinds of tuna species out there. Bluefin tuna isn't necessarily the tuna that we'd find in the can —

JT: Yeah, not anymore.

JW: — at the grocery store. Right, OK.

JT: So, up until the '60s or '70s, that would have been the case. In the 1970s, you start to pivot toward the sushi economy that is globalized. So, there's three different types, three different species of bluefin across the global ocean, two in the Pacific and one in the Atlantic. And the one in the Atlantic, which is the subject of this book, is the largest of all tuna. Right, so, again, this is a creature that is capable of growing to be the size of a horse. And this is the warm-blooded fish. Right, so somewhere on the evolutionary scale between a cod and a whale, sheathed, it's just an extraordinary creature.

JW: The writing in the prologue really, you know, does this sort of wonderfully intimate job of introducing us to the majesty of this fish. Would you mind reading a little bit from your prologue about, you know, sort of introducing us to this creature?

JT: Yeah, sure.

With tiny scales and eyes flush to her body—more streamlined than a torpedo—the bluefin contracts her pectoral fins into slots to generate less friction when swimming. She tears through salted water like a bullet, accelerating as if her heart were a Porsche engine. One of the fastest fish at sea, cheetah-like, exceeding most speed limits on American roadways, she clocks over fifty miles per hour (eighty kilometer per hour). In fact, the bluefin can cross the entire Atlantic Ocean in forty days, and somehow find the nine-mile (fourteen kilometers) stretch of the Strait of Gibraltar at its narrowest point to enter the Mediterranean Sea. She enjoys one of the longest migrations of any fish on the planet. While the bluefin travels epic distances straight across the open ocean, she also dives to depths of three thousand feet (one thousand meters) where water is black and icy cold. Some marine scientists think she communicates with her mates through flickering light. She is endowed with a “pineal window” on top of her head, between her eyes, “as photosensitive as the retina,” which, like other tunas and sharks, allows her to receive faint light as she plays, couples, and chases prey up and down the water column and in low levels of moonlight. How stunning she is. A line of small triangular finlets in electric yellow rims her upper and lower back by a tail whipping in constant motion, glinting, in contrast with the dark metallic blue on her top and the iridescent silvery white on her belly. She is camouflaged when other creatures view the depths of the sea from above, or the sun and moon from below. She is the ocean.

JW: That's just beautiful. The entire premise of this book is that these animals are, that this particular species is under threat of extinction. Is that fair to say?

JT: So, I think what's fair to say is it's the giants that are absolutely under threat of extinction in the sense that — when I talk to my dad and other old-timers that knew waters from the '60s and '70s, they knew — whether this be like, out of Gloucester or Montauk [New York] — they knew that there were stories of bluefin that would quite literally break the rod and reel of fishers that were out at sea because the bluefin were so powerful, literally they're like one big, giant muscle. You know, those days are gone. And so the preoccupation with these management regimes is not at all with the loss and the size of creatures, whether it be bluefin or cod or a Patagonian toothfish. They're not worried about the fact that those baseline shift downward and there are now less big fish in the sea. Their concern is how many of them are, so that we can extract that biomass in order to feed the markets.

JW: And what we're talking about in terms of markets are this sort of global fish and sushi regime, correct?

JT: Yeah, for the bluefin, certainly. In the 1970s is when you start to see the advent of the global sushi economy. And that, in large part, is because various people invested in creating the technology in order to move fresh fish across the globe as quick as they could. So, we know that the European record shows that the bluefin is one of the first recorded fisheries in human history dating back thousands of years to the time of the Phoenicians. The Roman emperors would have these banquets and they would serve — the biggest fish were always reserved for the emperors. And we know that the biggest fish in the Mediterranean and in the Atlantic is the bluefin. And I think there is another added dimension. People think the Japanese have been eating sushi for centuries, since time immemorial. And that's actually, at least with regards to the bluefin, not the case. Right, so, we know that to even serve fish on ice was not possible — we didn't have freezers until the end of the 1800s. There's this other dimension, too, which is the fact that the bluefin historically was actually a fish for the poor and the working class in Japan, quite literally, fed to cats because it's warm-blooded, decomposes really quickly. And as a result, that's one of the reasons why they started to serve the sushi with soy sauce to disguise flavor.

JW: So, the sort of process of kind of fishing and sort of multiple extraction points for this fish. Right. I mean, it's fished on the East Coast of North America. It's fished in the Mediterranean as well. And there is a sort of international response to the decline of the bluefin tuna, right?

JT: So, the second major character is the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas. The U.N. system loves its acronyms — so, this one would be I-C-C-A-T or ICCAT. At the end of World War II, effectively, after Europe and Japan experienced acute food shortages, the effort to double down on the fishing effort amongst industrialized countries was enormous. And so, you see after World War II, beginning around 1950, you can look at these graphs that show just the extraordinary, exponential increase in the extraction of wild fish from all of the global oceans. And so, ICCAT forms; so people knew effectively, already, that there was a problem in the 1950s when you had these long-line fisheries, which quite literally is setting a long line with hooks at various intervals.

JW: I think you explain in your book that these fishing lines can be miles and miles long.

JT: Yeah. And so once people were able then to start fishing virtually anywhere, any time of year, not just close to shore, but also on the high seas, there is an indication that there is a problem in the 1950s, certainly by the 1960s. ICCAT forms formally by treaty, [enters into force in 1969](#). But this is before. So, the key part, which is really quite fascinating, is that ICCAT forms before the advent of the global sushi economy.

JW: OK, so, even before we reach the stage where we all want delicious, bluefin in our sushi rolls, we knew that the fish was being overharvested.

JT: Right. There was concern even in the 1950s and '60s. Right. And it is precisely that concern that prompted ICCAT to form.

JW: And its goal, ostensibly, is to protect the remaining and perhaps even, you know, reestablish and grow what fish stocks remain of the bluefin tuna. Correct?

JT: Yes. So, I think part of the issue in many ways is quite literally crafted into the treaty is this language of maximizing yields. So, we know already that we're in the world of trade. But at the same time, given that that trade is in a wild, sea creature, the ecological dimensions are also part of it. ICCAT is there not to ensure that the giant tuna or the swordfish and the shark, the seabirds, the turtles — all these creatures that are under ICCAT — ICCAT isn't there to ensure an ocean full of fish, full of sea creatures into perpetuity for everyone on this planet. ICCAT is there to ensure that the member states that sign up to the treaty have their export markets protected. I mean, going to the meetings and, maybe we should talk about how going to the meetings wasn't actually itself very easy to do. But in any case, there's the sense of when you're at these meetings, it's literally, they are fish stocks. They are resources. They are units —

JW: Yeah.

JT: — to process and tranship. They are, exactly, like aggregate data points that can be graphed and measured and put in a metric. And so, you see the way it's all about the inventory.

JW: It's about knowing what the state of the fish is in order to fish it as much as possible without creating a wholesale extinction.

JT: Right. So, the concern then is twofold. How many fish do we take out of the sea each year? That's the net quota. A second concern is how do you divide that quota up in ways that effectively reproduce the inherited share based on colonial relationships of old. And so, you see the way the usual players, so, the European Union, the United States, Japan receive the lion's share of quota.

JW: Well, the subtitle of your book is *The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*. Is that an accurate way to describe what ICCAT is doing, kind of managing the extinction of this animal so that as much profit can be derived as possible?

JT: The short answer is yes. And the longer answer is that I think part of what is going on and part of what I observed from being in the field for three years is this recognition that clearly this institution, like others in the space of ocean governance, are not working very well. And clearly, they must not be working very well if we're at a state where half the world's supply of seafood is from farmed fish. So, you see sort of steadily the decline in wild fish and an increase in fish farming. And so, we know that these institutions must not be working very well if wildlife in

the ocean has declined so much over the years. And so, there's this sense in which I think it's imperative that people start to recognize and face directly the fact that the very institutions that are mandated to care for life at sea have been central to their extermination. You have to take seriously, the last time the planet lost this much life was when dinosaurs roamed this Earth and crashed. And we haven't yet mentioned the red gold piece — this is the most expensive fish money can buy.

JW: Can you say that ICCAT is partly responsible for the mass commodification of this fish?

JT: Effectively, you know, one way to look at it is ICCAT is an institution that is effectively there to regulate supply, but to regulate only the supply that appears legal. When you have a fish that's worth as much as the bluefin, the market incentive to develop illegal trade or black markets is enormous. So, as a result, in addition to the legal trade that ostensibly ICCAT is in charge of, there's also this parallel illegal market that runs alongside it that is also equally as concerning because we actually have no real idea about how many fish, how many bluefin are going to market.

JW: So, I want to talk about the sort of flip side to ICCAT, and that might be institutions or initiatives to save the bluefin tuna. Can you talk a little bit about that? Is there opposition to the work that ICCAT is doing? Has it been successful? How does that work?

JT: I'll share that chapter three was by far the hardest one for me to write in the whole book. I struggled with this chapter for years.

JW: And the title of this chapter is *Saving the Glamour Fish: The Limits of Environmental Activism*.

JT: Yeah, and so, it's here that I talk about what I call "the savior plot," which is this effort on behalf of well-meaning environmentalists and well-meaning journalists to raise the profile of the bluefin in the public sphere in order for people to realize just how bad overfishing is. So, you see throughout the coverage of the various bluefin campaigns this effort to save the fish. And should I read the opening?

JW: Yeah, please do.

JT: So, the opening of chapter three, *The Savior Plot*:

"Bluefin tuna is a glamour fish," a boat captain from New England wryly said to me over coffee at tiny café in New York City's Chinatown in May 2011. His statement startled me, but only later did I fully appreciate its implications for ocean governance. He was right. The bluefin was meant for global elites: a delectable consumed by the leisure class, a brilliant jewel in the prestige economy, a star singled out for supranational regulatory action. She was also, as I explore

in this chapter, a creature cast to play a leading role as “charismatic megafauna” in international news. Celebrity was not accorded other commercial fish in the convention area of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT). The bladed swordfish has not garnered as much public attention as the bluefin, while the plight of the other tunas under ICCAT’s remit—the bigeye, the yellowfin, the albacore—rarely, if ever, made global headlines. A diva dethroned. An icon under duress. A victim of crimes against Nature. The greed of industry. The incompetence of bureaucracy. The temptation of bootleggers in black markets. Ravenous consumers freely choosing in a world of infinite goods. Environmentalists selflessly battling against the impending collapse of a species. The bluefin, it seemed, needed a savior.

And so, the chapter really is an exploration of, in many ways, this effort by the journalists and the environmentalists of the “Global North” of mourning the loss of what they simultaneously destroy. And I think, in many ways, we need to ask, so why is it that this predatory regime of value prevails even in the face of this massive, transnational media campaign to draw attention to the plight of this fish? You see, there's basically two waves. So, you get the first one in the early 1990s, where there's these massive environmental campaigns. And so, let's save the bluefin that clusters in the West Atlantic. And then beginning in 2005-ish, you start to see revved-up the campaign to save bluefin in the eastern Atlantic. And so *The New York Times* covers this story up until 2012. And still to this day, still to this day, *The New York Times* has not mentioned a peep about what's going on with the bluefin —

JW: OK.

Jennifer: — and in this intervening time, when the fish effectively was declared saved by both the journalists and to a certain extent, the environmentalists, ICCAT and its industries have effectively capitalized on this very misguided perception. And so, you have the lowest level of quota for bluefin in the East Atlantic in 2010. And now, its highest quota. It's spiked. It's tripled in less, in 10 years' time.

JW: Because of this narrative that the ICCAT is sort of using for cover that the bluefin tuna has been saved.

JT: And further, my fear is that some of the environmentalists — clearly not all of the journalists — but the dominant narrative suggests that there is this sense like, “Oh, the bluefin, that's an old story.”

JW: Right —

JT: — so, now, the quota for bluefin in the East Atlantic is the highest ever in ICCAT's history. And further, there was a report by [Europol](#), the police agency for Europe, conducted a sting operation in the Mediterranean and found in 2018 that the illegal catch for bluefin is double the volume of the legal one.

JW: That's incredible. And of course, the ICCAT's mandate doesn't include this elite, doesn't include policing of this illegal fishing, correct?

JT: Technically, it doesn't, but — in 2011, they adopted these sorts of [strategies] like, "If we track and trace the fish, then that's going to really save the animal." And so, even though they've had these track- and trace- programs officially in place since 2011, this report suggesting that the legal catch is double the legal one, that's in 2018. Those protocols to track and trace have been in place for almost a decade now. And again, I think part of what is revealing about the savior plot and this language of saving the fish is its own limitations. Fish, the bluefin isn't an object. It's not a commodity. It's not money compounding interest in a bank account. This is an animal that needs to be respected and revered. And so, you see the way in some ways, even, whether it's the journalists, the environmentalists, even the scientists, — the ones that are in position to best sing her praises — have also internalized this predatory logic of fish as commodity.

JW: So, how do we move beyond this notion of the bluefin tuna, or any animal for that matter, as strictly a commodity?

JT: I think we're in a place where we know that you have to create [marine protected areas](#). These "no take" zones, free of fishing, that would allow creatures to rebound. We know that when the U.S. and the European Union and Japan and others subsidize their fishing industries, that effectively creates not only distortions in the market, but it allows the extraction to continue unabated. So, we know that those subsidies — some of this is before the World Trade Organization. So, we know some of this stuff needs to happen. And I think we're at a point that it's not necessarily a matter of what to do. I think we're at a point where we need — I think implicitly the book is asking us to expand the bounds of who counts in what must be done. And that as planetary stewards, we must incorporate vulnerable beings into our ambit of care. So, that means then cultivating a world of belonging and not "belongings." It's not some pie-in-the-sky kind of remedy. For me, it's the only practical way forward. And it's practical in the sense that it engages the enormity of the present danger of mass extinction. And it addresses the impasse that has resulted from what is an abject, technoscientific failure on behalf of these institutions to conserve sea creatures for future generations.

JW: So, Jen, I want to ask you a little bit about what brought you to this particular topic, into this particular animal. And what leads me to this question is what you read for us from chapter three, about how do conservation efforts attract the attention of people to mobilize towards saving these animals? And you mention the bluefin as a megafauna. And I think of conservation efforts that really do capture our attention are often around animals that have such an important place in human psyche: the elephant, the silverback gorilla, the orangutan, whales. Why did you decide to write a book about tuna and how did you gain access to these sort of international corridors of commodity extraction?

JT: You know, part of my frustration in some ways is the sense that the mountain gorilla and elephants, clearly the tiger — all creatures are important. But there is this persistence in the popular imagination when you're talking about sea creatures; the whales tend to be privileged, similar to the dolphins because these are mammals, just like us. And you see the way in which even the perception that fish or wildlife, too, is actually relatively recent — 1990s. So, there's a sense of in many ways, sort of elevating the profile of the fact that all beings must be respected and revered. And I recognize that even within the world of fisheries, the bluefin has its own hierarchy of value in the sense that the bluefin is the top fish amongst all of them in the world of fisheries. And so, I'm not at all suggesting we just revere the bluefin — we revere all creatures that are integral to the interdependency of life. So, in some ways, the answer to your question is how do we move in order to also take into account nonterritorial, nonland-based creatures that aren't just a mammal, just like us. And then, you know, some of that is just also from my own personal biography, growing up next to the sea. I have seen the marine environment degrade before my eyes in my lifetime. When I was a little kid, I would go with my family in summer and see these massive game fish on docks at the end of a sport tournament. And I just remember these were just like massive creatures and those creatures are now gone. And so, I came upon the idea to focus on the bluefin in large part because I was deciding on a dissertation topic, and I couldn't land on one that really spoke to me. And this was around the time of the [Copenhagen climate change talks](#). I remember going kayaking on Thanksgiving Day in 2009, wondering where all the fish had gone. This was at the time of the height of the bluefin campaign. And so, in many ways, I rode that wave, too. It was not easy to get access to ICCAT. Some researchers have been declined entry. In many ways, I was really indebted to a member of the U.S. delegation. So, you know, if we can remember, 2009, 2010 is before the rise of Trump. So, this is the Obama administration. And someone had reached out to me. And I remember hearing early on, when I was in the field, there was this comparison someone had made that with what the EU is to fisheries, the US is to climate. Meaning, in some ways the European Union is much more invested in fisheries economically than the U.S. is, which doesn't mean that there aren't other important questions about empire that come up in this, as I discuss in the book. But the point being, I was really surprised, when going to the field that the U.S. was one of the leading conservation voices at the time. Again, that has since changed. But nonetheless, my intuition is that in order to apply for observer status, you have to go through the secretariat and then the secretariat puts your application up to the member states. And if enough member states decline your application, then you're not granted the observer status. And so, I think I may have benefited from the fact that I'm a U.S. citizen and in some ways was able to expose the madness that is happening inside these regimes.

JW: Jen, I want to ask you about the process of writing this book. You mentioned that it began as a dissertation. It's a very analytical text, but it's also deeply emotional. And it's certainly engendered an emotional response in me as an editor and caused me to reflect on the choices of what I eat and allowed me to question or

forced me to question, do I know a little bit about the life of the animals that I consume? Where do the emotions behind this book come from for you?

JT: Some of it is certainly from my own biography and the feeling that having seen the marine environment degrade before my eyes in my own lifetime is a deep sadness that I feel as the loss of my home. So, there's this sense and I think not just my own experience, but for many people, the sea is — it's like I can go anywhere and feel if I see waves crashing on the shoreline, I somehow feel at home. And so, in some ways, the end of a creature that is no longer giant is to me a recognition of the way in which my own home has been on the receiving end of just enormous extraction and destruction in ways that I didn't consent to. And there were these moments when I was writing throughout the material, and at some point I knew intuitively, that I couldn't refer to this creature as an "it" because by doing so, I would reinforce the alienation that is otherwise spread throughout the social structure. It's interesting — in Spanish, it's *el atún rojo*. So, actually, in Spanish the bluefin is treated as masculine. And I decided to go with feminine, not as to treat the bluefin as like a damsel in distress, as a being that needs to be saved, but rather to be in solidarity with nonhuman nature in the way that women's work is also available for free, it seems. So, I made that choice. And it's actually really difficult to do because you realize just how hardwired it is in our linguistic repertoire.

JW: You know, at the same time, though, I feel like you've rewired at least my brain in this way.

JT: That's great.

JW: I don't think I could look at a bluefin tuna and see it as an it. I mean, again, it's this marvelous ability you have in this book, to, and it goes back to the way we opened this conversation about the cover — it's another way of making us look this fish in the eye —

JT: Right.

JW: — and to relate to it as a fellow creature. So, I want to thank you for that.

JT: Yeah, I think it's important for me to acknowledge, too. I'm recognizing now that the book is out in the world, there is a trauma. There is a turmoil. There is something deeply unsettling about the book. I remember, Jason, at one point you had asked me, "How do you practice self-care?" And so, there's a sense I was kind of adamant about in the book, the way in which I do want the reader to feel that tremendous weight. But at the same time, to not feel paralyzed by it. I hope people are able to confront directly the anxiety in order for us to heal. So, that in the sense that we can't adequately move out of this unless we know what this is.

JW: Yes.

JT: I hope that once we can name what this is, we can begin to neutralize its power in order to chart another course, and that must come. I mean, this regime is not going to be here forever. And so, in many ways, I do feel it an invitation for people to say, “This is not the world I want to live in. What is the world that I want to live in, that I want to help co-create?” And that’s the place I hope people come to, so that they see these creatures as beings that share our Earth, that they do need to be reclaimed and loved and respected because they’re all part of our planetary home.

JW: Well, I think you’ve done a wonderful job of both lifting the lid on these processes as well as forcing us again, to relate to the animals that we share this planet with and sometimes eat — as in some ways equals to us in terms of claims to this Earth. You’ve done a wonderful job. It’s a beautiful book. It tells an amazing, wild, unbelievable story. And I hope it changes people’s minds. Well, Jen, it’s been an absolute pleasure to have this extended conversation with you postpublication and to reflect on just the enormous amount of work and labor and care that you’ve put into this book. I hope it’s an inspiration to anyone who’s looking to study the fate of our relationship to other animals.

JT: Yeah.

JW: So, thank you.

JT: Thanks, Jason.

This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.