

The background of the cover is a textured, painterly illustration of a fish's head, likely a bluefin tuna, rendered in various shades of blue and green. The fish's eye is prominent, and its mouth is slightly open. The overall style is reminiscent of a watercolor or oil painting, with visible brushstrokes and a moody, atmospheric quality. The text is overlaid on this background.

RED GOLD

THE MANAGED EXTINCTION *of the*
GIANT BLUEFIN TUNA

JENNIFER E. TELESCA

A BOOK DISCUSSION GUIDE

for *RED GOLD: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*
by Jennifer E. Telesca

PRAISE FOR THE BOOK

“Both unusually thorough and unusually heartfelt, *Red Gold* is filled with high quality factual detail yet is framed with graceful, thoughtfully considered language. As close as I’ve been to this extraordinary fish as a living creature and as the object of intense debate and conflicting policies over the years, I admire the job Jennifer Telesca has pulled off. I also learned a lot.”

—CARL SAFINA, author of *Song for the Blue Ocean* and *Becoming Wild*

“Engaging and well-argued, *Red Gold* is an exemplary documentation of how bad-faith science conducted at the behest of corporate interests provides cover for the over-exploitation of ‘natural resources.’”

—DANIEL PAULY, author of *Vanishing Fish*

“*Red Gold* offers a deep and disturbing portrait of the intersecting impacts of the global food chain, international regulation, and ocean conservation. Jennifer E. Telesca’s powerful prose and analytic insight chart the drama of human-induced species decline in the name of conservation. Combining ethnography, political economy, legal studies, and scientific research with fast-paced storytelling, she provides an intimate account of ocean governance and environmental loss.”

—BRENDA CHALFIN, author of *Neoliberal Frontiers*

“Jennifer E. Telesca’s wide-ranging study of the giant bluefin tuna challenges many deeply held dogmas. We overfish because of the tragedy of the commons and think the solution is regulation. But Telesca argues that we are regulating our way to extinction. The tragedy is not of the commons, but of commodification. The drive to extinction will not stop until we value these animals as fellow travelers on this planet, rather than as resources from whom we can extract value.”

—DALE JAMIESON, director, Center for Environmental and Animal Protection, New York University

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) is the world's foremost organization for managing and conserving tunas, seabirds, turtles, and sharks traversing international waters. Founded by treaty in 1969, ICCAT stewards what has become under its tenure one of the planet's most prominent endangered fish: the Atlantic bluefin tuna. Called "red gold" by industry insiders for the exorbitant price her ruby-colored flesh commands in the sushi economy, the giant bluefin tuna has crashed in size and number under ICCAT's custodianship.

With regulations to conserve these sea creatures in place for half a century, why have so many big bluefin tuna vanished from the Atlantic? In *Red Gold*, Jennifer E. Telesca offers unparalleled access to ICCAT to show that the institution has faithfully executed the task assigned it by international law: to fish as hard as possible to grow national economies. ICCAT manages the bluefin not to protect them but to secure export markets for commodity empires—and, as a result, has become complicit in their extermination.

The decades of regulating fish as commodities have had disastrous consequences. Amid the mass extinction of all kinds of life today, *Red Gold* reacquaints the reader with the splendors of the giant bluefin tuna through vignettes that defy technoscientific and market rationales. Ultimately, this book shows, changing the way people value marine life must come not only from reforming ICCAT but from transforming the dominant culture that consents to this slaughter.

Q&A: RED GOLD

Why “red gold”?

Just one bluefin tuna from the Pacific sold for a record of USD\$3.1 million at Tokyo’s Tsukiji marketplace in January 2019. Industry insiders call the bluefin “red gold” for the exorbitant price her ruby-colored flesh commands in the sushi economy. Yet few people know how majestic she is: enjoying one of the longest migrations of any fish on the planet, swimming in packs lightening fast from one side of the Atlantic to the other. The bluefin is not an ordinary fish. She is warm-blooded. That’s why her meat is red.

Why is the shrinking size as important as the shrinking number of bluefin?

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists Atlantic bluefin tuna as “endangered” on its “red list” of threatened species. Preoccupation with counting the number of bluefin tuna detracts from how small she has rapidly become. Only a few decades ago, fishers along the US Atlantic seaboard called the bluefin “giant” because she once grew to the size of a horse and weighed well over a ton. Unlike people, fish produce more kin the older and bigger they are. To rob the bluefin of her capacity to become giant robs her of a future to flourish.

Which creatures are under ICCAT’s care?

ICCAT formed by treaty in 1969 to care for creatures crossing national jurisdictions over the vast expanse of the Atlantic Ocean and its nearby seas, including the Mediterranean. The bluefin is not the only animal that has declined in size and number under ICCAT’s stewardship. Swordfish, marlins, sharks, tunas (such as bigeye and yellowfin), seabirds, turtles, and other creatures caught as “by-catch” on the high seas are now all stressed.

How does the author know what she knows?

ICCAT prohibits journalists and the lay public from meetings. Despite restrictions on access, ICCAT accredited the Institute for Public Knowledge at New York University to become an observer in 2010. In this capacity, the author spent three years attending various ICCAT meetings, and another two interviewing some forty ICCAT representatives. Archival materials and news media accounts supplemented hard-to-get data based in first person, on-the-ground research.

What is ICCAT doing, if not its advertised purpose to conserve sea creatures under threat?

ICCAT does the job asked of it by international law: to fish as hard as possible to grow national economies. ICCAT is an international trade organization that protects not the majesty of the bluefin or the indispensability of ocean ecologies. ICCAT secures the export markets of its member states. ICCAT works so well that it has organized with impressive “efficiency” the profitable extermination of commercial fish in just a few decades.

Why is the “tragedy of the commons” misleading, inadequate, and outdated?

The metaphor of the “tragedy of the commons” spread like wildfire after Garrett Hardin popularized the idea in 1968. To forestall collapse in commonly held natural “resources,” nation-states believed they must privatize and regulate. ICCAT member states issued the first quota for bluefin tuna occupying the western Atlantic in 1981. Quotas for bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic came in 1998. No longer held in common, the bluefin has become the national property of the ICCAT member states allocated a quota to catch her. The tragedy of lost fish is rooted not in the commons but in commodification.

Why is fisheries science characterized as an alibi for extermination?

Fisheries science is not a neutral arbiter constraining the demand to catch as many fish as possible to the threshold of collapse. Not all scientists at ICCAT are environmentally friendly. Some work for industry and are tasked, officially, to protect not fish but fishers. In this regime of value, fisheries science is mandated to rationalize the inventory and predict the number of commercial fish for the expansion of futures markets.

Why do rich and rogue countries win the games of trade, even when the poor and peripheral ones participate in talks?

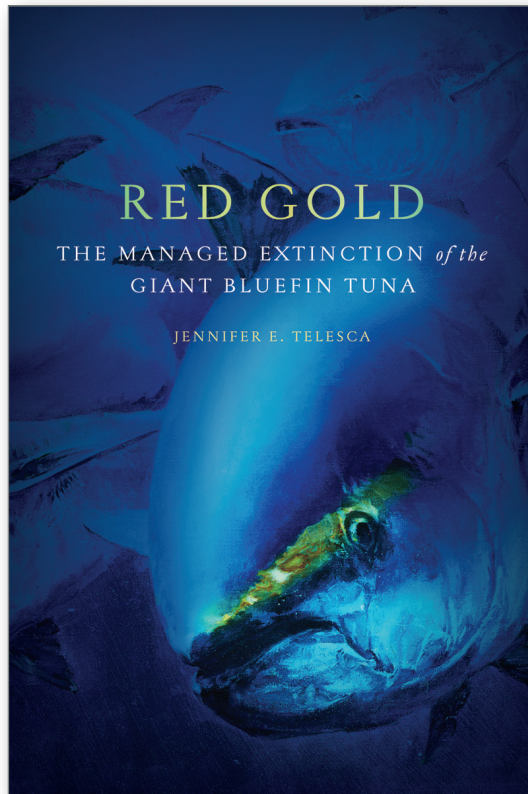
More than 40% of countries from across the globe participate as ICCAT member states. Yet outcomes at each ICCAT meeting consistently favor the rich trading areas. Power asymmetries are evident not only in the rules ICCAT produces, such as allocating export quotas most to industrialized countries. Poor coastal states are disadvantaged in the very process of decision making: the few delegates sent from tight budgets, the mass of bureaucratic paperwork under review by small staffs, the inability of consensus to accommodate dissent.

What is the status of the Atlantic bluefin today?

Since export quotas were lowest in 2010, ICCAT member states have increased the quota for bluefin tuna caught in the eastern Atlantic in 2020 by an astounding 179%. For bluefin tuna in the western Atlantic, ICCAT member states have raised the quota since 2010 by 34%. Now that news coverage about the plight of the Atlantic bluefin tuna has evaporated, ICCAT has green lighted more extraction of an endangered fish at a time of mass extinction.

What are the lessons for planetary stewardship?

As the protagonist of this book, the tremendous Atlantic bluefin tuna invites the reader to relate to life anew. Her quiet splendor reminds us that stewardship requires more touch, more esteem, more courtesy, more regard, more curiosity, more humility, more engagement to enable movement along a path where people reacquaint themselves with the world of another being. The bluefin is not a thing to be “saved,” like money compounding interest in a bank account. She is a being to be respected. How to get to a place of determining what is to be done may prove challenging but more transformational in the end.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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MORE INFO:

z.umn.edu/redgold