

## One View of Loss

*“exhausted” “commercially extinct”  
 “collapse” “egregious violations”*

These are the words and phrases found in an article entitled “Still Waters” in the April issue of National Geographic. Authored by writer Fen Montaigne, the article describes the unimpeded decimation of bluefin tuna populations in the Mediterranean Sea and eastern Atlantic Ocean. These migratory animals come to the Mediterranean each year to spawn. An armada of purse-seine vessels then catch the fish, transfer them to cages and hold them in offshore pens to fatten up before being butchered for the Japanese market.

Under the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna, to which the United States and 42 other nations are signatory, the annual

quota for bluefin tuna is 32,000 metric tons. According to Montaigne, the actual take is between 50,000 and 60,000 tons. Despite acknowledging that overfishing is occurring, the Commission, chaired by U.S. National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)

director William Hogarth, refused to reduce the quota for 2008. Hogarth lobbied strenuously, as did the Commission’s own biologists, that the quota must be decreased and violations punished. He is quoted in the National Geographic article as saying, “The bottom line was that, as chairman, I felt I was sort of presiding over the demise of one of the most magnificent fish that swims the ocean.”

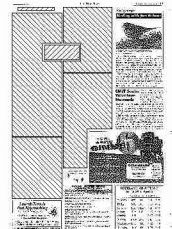
I read the piece and gazed at the disturbing pictures on a quiet afternoon last week. The next morning, my telephone rang. It was Kate Simmons, a local representative for the National Environmental Trust, asking me if I would like to participate in a conference call organized by her group with Fen Montaigne. National Geographic photographer Brian Skerry, a representative from William Hogarth’s office, Congressman Tom Allen, New England Fishery Management Council (NEFMC) chairman John Pappalardo and Craig Pendleton, Maine fisherman and director of the North Atlantic Marine Alliance (NAMA) in Saco. After pondering for about 10 seconds, I said, “Certainly!”

A little background: The National Environmental Trust, based in Washington, D.C., is a non-profit organization established in 1994 whose reason for being is to disseminate information about environmental issues. The Trust uses public education campaigns to inform people of complex environmental issues in order to get them to take action. As one of its tools, the Trust uses local people in individual states to help link national problems to local issues. Kate Simmons, of Camden, is one such employee of the Trust.

A bit more background: The FAO (Food and Agricultural Organization, part of the United Nations) announced last year that, based on 2004 data, 24% of global fish stocks are exploited or depleted. In the Northwest Atlantic (which includes Newfoundland), at least 13% of our fish stocks are



*by Melissa Waterman*



overfished. Around the Antarctic, 46% of the fish found in that inhospitable latitude are overfished. Krill, the tiny shrimp-like invertebrate upon which the southern ocean's food chain is based, comprises most of that commercial catch. And in the Gulf of Maine region the debate continues about whether our codfish stocks can ever be rebuilt to their former glory.

The telephone conversation last week among the writers, regulators and a few reporters ebbed and flowed like the tide. The ethos of the two National Geographic people became clear in the first few minutes. "During my 30 years as an undersea diver I have seen the degradation firsthand," said Skerry, who hales from Massachusetts. "I wanted to put a face on our seafood. We don't know about the ocean animals we eat, that these underwater creatures are as amazing as lions on the Serengeti. I also wanted to shed light on the human costs worldwide [from overfishing], the social ramifications and loss of protein."

The wholesale depletion of bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean shook Montaigne profoundly. "I found a personification of the tragedy of the commons there," he said. He spent two summers in the Mediterranean and off North Africa to complete his story. "There is a complete lack of enforcement [by the EU] in those waters," he said. Furthermore, what happens in the Mediterranean directly affects tuna fishermen in U.S. waters. "The fact that the tuna do an east-to-west migration means poor seasons in New England. Fishermen could only harvest 13% to 14% of the allowable quota [of bluefin tuna] last year."

Speaking on behalf of William Hogarth, NMFS chief science advisor Steve Murowski spoke of the agency's efforts to reduce the bluefin tuna quota. "He [Hogarth] wanted a 15,000-ton quota. He really worked hard for that," Murowski said. Murowski also praised the U.S. fishery management system. "We have to be able to rebuild many stocks," he said. "The Atlantic sea scallop has rebounded as a result of cutting fishing effort and closed areas." He noted that under the newly reauthorized Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act, the NEFMC must eliminate overfishing on 48 listed stocks by 2010. "We are holding scoping sessions now to give guidance to the Council on how to do this," he said.

Craig Pendleton had a few specific thoughts on how to go about the task. "Get rid of days at sea. It's just wrong," he said. Over the past 12 years NAMA has offered the Council several alternative means of managing fish stocks that don't penalize fishermen. "This year we have an expanded group working on Amendment 16 [an amendment to the New England Groundfish Management Plan to end overfishing required by law to be in force by 2008]. It's the scale at which we do fisheries management that is out of whack. We need to be looking at inshore and offshore areas."

John Pappalardo, who is also a member of the Cape Cod

Commercial Hook Fishermen's Association, admitted that there was merit in the much-touted concept of area management, now under consideration by the Council. "Community-based fishery management is very intriguing. There's a lot of hope and promise in that direction," he said. He noted that currently there is a sector allocation of the Georges Bank cod quota for his organization. "The guys no longer feel that they have to go get them. Now they self-monitor each other with peer pressure. There's been a major change in perspective in the past three years."

Skerry emphasized that all is not lost, that there are measures being taken now to revitalize the marine environment and all the creatures living under the sea, such as the marine protected areas in place in New Zealand. In these "no take" zones, nothing may be disturbed. As a consequence, vegetation and myriad marine animals have rebounded, creating a type of marine refuge that then seeds other underwater areas. "There are solutions out there," Skerry said. "Better fisheries management is one. Marine protected areas are another."

At the close of the hour-long conference call, I put down my pen and looked out the window at the serene spring landscape around my home. All looked barren. The grass was a dull beige, the maple trees dripped melted ice, and mud billowed like frozen waves around the driveway. Yet I knew that underneath the soil bulb shoots were beginning their insistent march up to the light; the lilac and forsythia buds were swollen and ready for just a few more hours of sunlight before they would pop; hidden perennial plants ringing my porch were drawing on reserves of sugar laid in last summer to fuel their sudden emergence from the ground.

While my landscape might look barren, in fact it was rich. In the oceans, however, such fecundity is being erased.