



Are yellowfin on the comeback?

It seems that yellowfin tuna are not gone forever from New Zealand waters.

Dare we hope that this season is just the start of their return, or is this just a painful reminder of the superb fishery that has been lost?

The Bay of Plenty was once our yellowfin 'tuna capital' over summer. For most years in the 1980s and 1990s the Whakatane Sportfishing Club alone would record over 400 yellowfin per season, but a few years ago the famous Whakatane Tuna Tournament had to change its name. The word 'tuna' was removed from the title because prized yellowfin cannot be caught any more. Despite great prizes on offer, 2014 was the 5th year running that not a single yellowfin was landed in the tournament.

Tuna stocks in the western Pacific are highly migratory and their abundance relies on effective management and good fishing practices across the entire Pacific.

Bigeye, yellowfin skipjack and albacore tuna caught in NZ waters migrate from spawning grounds in the tropics, where more than 6,000 industrial fishing vessels are licensed to fish for tuna in the western and central Pacific Ocean. Fishing boats have flooded into this area over the last 20 years as stocks have declined in other oceans. Yellowfin tuna is now on the brink of overfishing.

As the western and central Pacific Ocean is fished down the tuna population contracts, affecting regions on the edge of the tuna's natural range, like NZ.

Among the issues impacting on tuna is the bycatch of juvenile yellowfin by purse seine vessels using fish aggregating devices (FADs) in tropical waters.

According to the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, 15-20% of the catch from purse seiners fishing on FADs is made up of undersized tunas, including juvenile yellowfin and bigeye.

In one study the average fork length of yellowfin caught around FADs was 50 cm, compared with an average of 130 cm in unassociated purse seine sets.

Last year the scientific committee recommended reducing fishing mortality from fisheries that take juveniles, with the goal to increase to yields and reduce any further impacts on the spawning potential.

So, is it better international management, increased spawning success or favourable oceanographic conditions that have helped yellowfin reappear in 2015?

It is probably too early to speculate on the reasons for their reappearance in New Zealand, but in reality it is probably a combination of all three factors.

ENDS

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