



Bluefin Tuna: New Record Price for Carcass Further Devaluates the Fish **Carl Safina**

Here's how I can tell if an environmental news story has permeated the public consciousness: my 86-year old mother phones to tell me about it. She doesn't have a computer, just her morning newspaper. So when she called to read to me that a single bluefin tuna had sold at wholesale auction in Tokyo for a record \$736,000, I knew the story had really been heard 'round the world. "Yes, mom," I said; "I heard about it."

But here's the thing that surprised me more: It didn't wow her. She didn't think it was the least bit impressive. She thought it was awful. Way to go, mom; love ya.

On the other hand, the media gushed. So did all the people in the story. I thought it was pretty sick, and I'll tell you why.

The main story was sent by Associated Press and as far as I could tell most of the other media picked up on that story.* It started off, "This tuna is worth savoring: It cost nearly three-quarters of a million dollars."

Translation: The Associated Press and most people on Earth can know that the tuna is valuable only because of how much money someone paid for it. They don't seem to understand that the price, cost, and value of something are three very different things.

A deep-pocketed self-promoting narcissistic owner of a chain of sushi restaurants paid an irrational price for a fish. That does not make the fish more valuable. It only makes it more expensive.

And in a very real way, this devalues the fish itself.

Consider: though once abundant, bluefin tuna are now quite overfished. (Two recent papers, including one by me, discuss the collapse of two different bluefin populations in the Atlantic: <http://bit.ly/zc6LCn> and <http://bit.ly/AgcGxM>. And if you go to <http://bit.ly/6PTvj> and scroll down, you see that a bluefin tuna population that once lived in the South Atlantic was wiped out in the 1960s.

Because of scarcity, bluefin tuna are hard to find and hard to catch most of the time in most places. Fishing is expensive, so scarcity should begin to protect the fish because people should stop pursuing them when they are too depleted to be profitable. This actually has a name: commercial extinction.

But if someone is willing to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars?; that subsidizes a lot of fishless days. An eventual payoff so huge keeps people pursuing fish they cannot catch. And it brings enormous pressure not to reduce catch quotas, when scientific advice has long indicated that the fish continue declining and the quota is too high.

So what is the cost of a bluefin tuna? You will read that it was over \$1200 per pound, and will retail for around \$100 a bite. But that's just the price. The cost is that we are losing them—because the price is too high.

Several of the news outlets that ran the story have photos of the grinning buyers. I would bet a whole tuna that none of these people on the buying side of the equation know anything about the animal they are dismembering. A giant bluefin tuna is one of the most awesome creatures on Earth, a warm blooded fish capable of swimming at highway speeds and crossing oceans; then finding its way home in a trackless ocean. Dismembering it for sushi is a kind of dis-remembering, because no one on the eating end of this strange deal will see the fish, only slivers of flesh which, as far as their size, could have come from any mackerel.

Before the knife sliced, the giant fish was already lost from view. If you look at different news stories about this particular fish on the Web, you see photos of the creature plastered with stickers and banners. The fish itself has long ceased to be a wild animal; it's not even a carcass—it's just a commodity, a product. It is so far from being honored or remembered as an animal that it might as well be Knipschildt chocolate (\$2,600-a-pound; <http://bit.ly/44od8Q>) or DeLafée chocolate with real gold (<http://bit.ly/h60POT>), or a case of Dalmore 62 Single Highland Malt Scotch (\$60-grand per bottle; <http://bit.ly/xEpgqO>). Any of those would be as decadent, but arguably much more fun. (That's what I would argue, as long as someone else was paying.)

The winning bidder spoke thus to the Associated Press: "Japan has been through a lot the last year due to the disaster. Japan needs to hang in there. So I tried hard myself and ended up buying the most expensive one." He said he wanted to give Japan a boost after last year's devastating tsunami.

How very civic-minded of him. Or, maybe he really just wanted to give his restaurant chain a boost, because, let's face it, he got an incredible amount of free advertising. But if you really are concerned about people devastated by a tsunami, would you a) give \$763,000 to a stricken town or school system or hospital, or b) buy a tuna?

The Associated Press story opened with, "This tuna is worth savoring." What's really needed is for the story to have ended with, "This tuna is worth saving." The difference is "or." It's always a choice.

#

* Swank Sushi: Tuna Fetches Record \$736k in Tokyo, by Malcolm Foster, Associated Press, January 5, 2012.