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## Overfishing our seas hurts local fishers and our oceans

By Todd Steiner

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The industrial Hawaii longline tuna fishing fleet reached its yearly catch limit this week for bigeye tuna, or ahi, and should stop harvesting for the rest of the year to allow this species to recover.

The catch limit is in response to the fact that the species is being overfished, and the catch limit is set through an international treaty ratified by 27 nations that fish in the Pacific, with the goal of providing long-term conservation and sustainable use of highly migratory fish stocks.

Overfishing is the reason bigeye tuna are listed as ‘Vulnerable’ by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species, and globally there has been a decline of 42 percent (1992-2007). The Western and Central Pacific population of Bigeye tuna represents more than 20 percent of the existing population, and as such is crucial to the survival of the species as whole.

Reaching the catch limit is supposed to trigger a pause in effort by the industrial fishing fleet, and could be a boon for local Hawaiian fishers who use handlines to capture ahi for the local market. The temporary moratorium allows these small-scale fishers to get a better price for their catch and better compete with giant longline vessels that set over 9 million baited hooks placed on tens of millions of miles of fishing line each year.

Hypothetically, reaching the catch limit and thus limiting fishing effort for the rest of the year also protects the fish stocks from overfishing, thus protecting the resource for future years and generations. Furthermore, because the Hawaii tuna longline fishery sets millions of baited hooks each year, a temporary stoppage could ‘hypothetically’ also reduce the catch of marine wildlife. The fishery catches, harms and kills scores of endangered sea turtles, false killer whales and other marine mammals, and albatross and other seabirds, not to mention a myriad of unwanted fish thrown back dead or injured.

I say ‘hypothetically’ because the Hawaii Longline Fishing Association has found an underhanded way around honoring the U.S. commitment to an international conservation treaty, essentially allowing it to nearly double its catch limit. Instead of taking a break from fishing to allow fish stocks to recover, the Association continues to fish by purchasing the imaginary catch limit from U.S. territories in the Pacific, i.e., catch limits that otherwise would not be used, and would instead contribute to conservation of the species.

Turtle Island Restoration Network believes this is not only bad policy, but that it is also illegal. The US government should be a leader, not a cheater when it comes to assuring recovery of overfished stocks of tuna and honoring its treaty commitments. That is why we and other environmental organizations (represented by Earthjustice) challenged this shady action in federal court in 2014.

Our aim is to not only make the oceans safe for marine wildlife like whales and sea turtles, but also to ensure sustainable harvests of overfished species like bigeye tuna so that future

generations can also enjoy the nutritional, economic, and spiritual sustenance that comes from a healthy ocean.

Please join us in calling for an end to this underhanded loophole that undermines conservation.

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Todd Steiner is a wildlife biologist and Executive Director of Turtle Island Restoration Network (Seaturtles.org). Turtle Island is a leading advocate for the world's oceans and marine wildlife with over 250,000 supporters and members around the world. Our mission is to mobilize people in local communities around the world to protect marine wildlife and the oceans and inland watersheds that sustain them.