

Eco-fascists target tuna fishermen

by Andrew Rotstein

Acceding to pressure from the further reaches of the “animal rights” movement, the three largest canners of tuna sold in the United States announced in April that they would no longer market tuna caught by means that might endanger dolphins. The Starkist division of H.J. Heinz, Van Camp Seafood’s Chicken of the Sea, and the Bumble Bee brand, will stop buying tuna caught by the highly efficient purse seine technique, and will soon label all their products as “dolphin-safe.” The three firms together market 70% of the tuna sold in the country.

The step was taken in the face of a hysterical propaganda campaign that selected and grossly distorted the facts of the issue, and sought to portray tuna fishermen as a pack of buccaneering sadists.

As often happens with those misinformed-or-worse charlatans who hide behind the name of “environmentalists,” the effect of these actions will be anything but benign. The results will likely include increasing costs to the consumer, sacrificing U.S. jobs, and imperiling the tuna population by increasing the catch of younger fish. It is even doubtful that there will be any beneficial impact on the dolphin population—the cuddly marine mammals whose numbers are, in any event, actually *increasing*, according to scientists.

A model of efficiency

The controversy stems from the fact that the yellowfin tuna in the rich fishing grounds of the tropical eastern Pacific characteristically travel in schools, in the company of large numbers of dolphins. The reasons for this are not entirely understood, but may have something to do with their complementary feeding patterns.

Around 1960, the San Diego-based U.S. Pacific tuna fleet started using very large nets, called purse seines, to catch the fish, replacing much less efficient techniques. The productivity of the industry is crucial, because the price paid per unit weight of fish has fallen over the years. Thus, only the very large volume of catch made possible by the industry’s capital-intensity makes this excellent source of protein an affordable part of the diet of many Americans.

The dolphins normally swim above the tuna, and some get caught in the nets. Over the last 30 years, the industry has pioneered techniques of freeing the vast bulk of the dolphins, though some invariably perish anyway. Each registered

American vessel is required to carry a government inspector who carefully tracks the mortality count, which is limited by law to about 20,000 per year.

As the technology of the release mechanism and the skill of the crews have improved over the years, the mortality rate has plummeted. Government records indicate that of the 3,403 net-catches, or “sets,” conducted by the American fleet last year, fully 58% had *no* dolphin deaths, and nearly 90% had five or fewer, although in the average set, 650 dolphins are initially caught in the net. The U.S. dolphin toll dropped to 12,649 last year, compared to 17,000 in 1973—and this in a world where the spotted dolphins alone number over 6 million!

The anti-tuna interests maintain that a few government inspectors have underreported mortalities, and that the figures omit those animals that are seriously injured, leaving them vulnerable to predator sharks. Such scandal-mongering is, of course, the stuff on which unscrupulous “investigative journalists” and fundraisers thrive. But typically, it obscures the larger picture: Authoritative studies by marine scientists estimate that the population of various dolphin species, which had all declined between the 1960 initiation of the purse seine method and the late 1970s, have risen sharply since 1979, and are now approaching their pre-1960 numbers.

‘Don’t bother me with facts’

But the animal rights enthusiasts, who show more concern for warm-blooded beasts than for the human victims of malnutrition, appear unmoved by facts. They have instead concentrated their publicity campaign on the alleged wanton maiming and murder of innocent animals, an approach that nets fundraisers for groups like Greenpeace staggering sums each year.

The San Francisco-based Earth Island Institute has widely circulated an “undercover” video replete with gory shots of dead and dying dolphins. The problem is, the shots were taken on a Panamanian-flagged vessel of French design and French catch technology—quite different from the American versions, and unimpeded by U.S. regulations.

In fact, even the EEI and Marine Mammal Fund admit that foreign fleets kill many times more dolphins than American operators. Yet it is precisely the tuna boats of these other countries that will pick up the slack left by the American fleet. The U.S. boats, in turn, will be left either to fish for younger tuna—which do not travel in the company of dolphins, but whose catch will endanger the tuna population in the future—or they will have to travel to the western Pacific waters, where competition is intense and where transportation costs back to the American market will be higher.

A cult of animal worship

The animal rights movement, which has demanded everything short of luxury chateaux for farm animals, has created

a mystique around the dolphin. Although the animal has some interesting mental traits, and shows an endearing affinity for humans somewhat like a house pet, the save-the-dolphins fad is the work of a cult—and a highly lucrative one, at that.

Much of the interest springs from a scientist-turned-mystic named John Lilly. Lilly began by doing some purportedly serious studies of the dolphin brain in the 1960s, but by the 1980s was arguing with a straight face that dolphins relayed extraterrestrial guidance toward a higher consciousness. This notion attracted a swarm of those rigorous minds who are otherwise drawn to Hollywood, including Kris Kristofferson, Olivia Newton-John, and Phyllis Diller, all of whom communed and swam with Lilly's captive specimens in Los Angeles. Some aficionados apparently considered Flipper and his friends to be reincarnated intelligent beings from another planet—"Martians in wet suits," as *Time* magazine called them.

As the purveyors of the animal-rights hype began spreading their ideology to schoolchildren, saving the dolphins—that is, shutting down the tuna industry—became a *cause célèbre* for the super-sensitive and the earth-conscious.

One jet-setter who saw the spurious "dolphin-killer" film was Ani Moss, a former model whose husband, Jerome Moss, is the head of A&M records. She persuaded her husband to donate an A&M sound stage to put on a "Dolphin Awareness Evening" for the glitterati, and prevailed on him to lobby Anthony J.F. O'Reilly, the chairman of Heinz, with whom he shared some contacts through charitable activities.

On top of the Moss connection, there are rumors in the tuna industry that the Greenpeace group had been moving to accumulate a block of stock in the Heinz firm, and to otherwise influence shareholders through a corporate campaign. The *Wall Street Journal* reports that Heinz is now asking the government to strictly limit the number of "non-dolphin safe" tuna that can be imported, in a kind of back-door protectionist move.

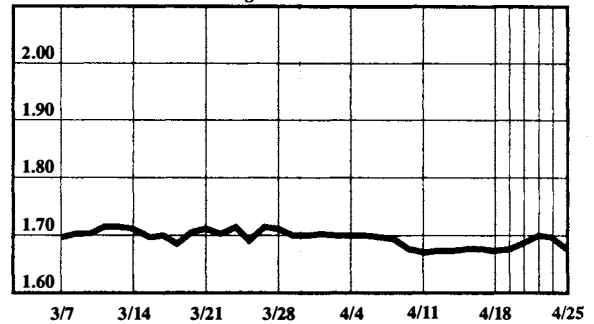
Ironically, while most U.S. tuna boat operators take care to preserve the dolphin for both economic and public relations reasons, other nations do not have the same view. According to one industry source, Peru harvests over 10,000 dolphins a year, and the meat sells for less than chicken in the market. In any event, squeezing U.S. tuna fishermen out of the eastern Pacific will leave these waters to South American operators with inferior technology and less painstaking practices, probably increasing the dolphin kill.

There are fewer than a hundred operating U.S. tuna vessels left, as two-thirds of the fleet was lost in the 1980s, along with 12,000 cannery jobs in southern California, in the last invasion of imports. Perhaps most ominously, the affair shows the influence a band of kooks can have when they cleverly play to the irrational feelings of an uninformed population.

Currency Rates

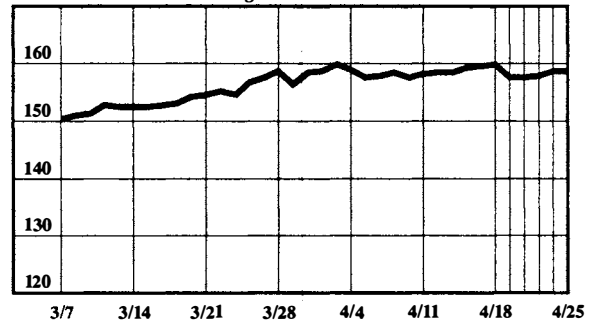
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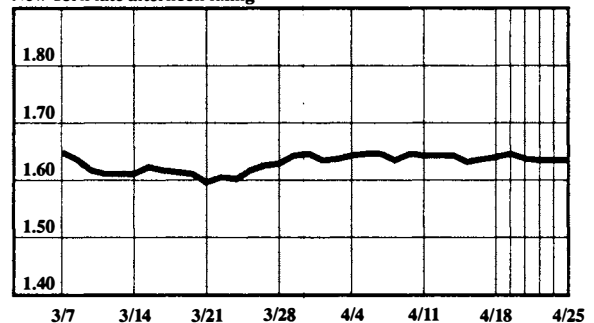
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The British pound in dollars

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The dollar in Swiss francs

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