
Pacific tuna fishermen take on Greenpeace

San Diego is now safer from the environmentalists and their phony claims about the dangers to dolphins from purse seine fishing, as Teresa Platt of the Fishermen's Coalition explains.

Teresa Platt of the San Diego Fishermen's Coalition gave the following interview to Jim Duree on July 25, at the "Wise Use Leadership Conference" in Reno, Nevada, where Platt was awarded the "Wise Use Grass-Roots Activist of the Year" award.

EIR: How was the Fishermen's Coalition set up?

Platt: The Fishermen's Coalition came out of a protest we had on the docks in 1992, when the environmentalist group Greenpeace brought its ship *Rainbow Warrior* into San Diego. We just "couldn't take it any more." We organized the biggest protest they had ever been subjected to, and Greenpeace was very surprised. After that, we said, "Well, let's keep it going." So we meet the second Tuesday of every month at the local fishermen's hall.

EIR: Why did Greenpeace bring the *Rainbow Warrior* to San Diego?

Platt: Greenpeace wanted to revoke our [National Marine Fisheries Service] permit to fish for yellowfin tuna in the eastern Pacific. They were demanding a zero "accidental kill rate" for dolphins in our fishery. But these fish run in association with dolphins. We can't fish without a permit giving an allowance for some marine mammal mortality. We fish completely legally, have observers aboard the boat, and use the best gear and techniques that there are. But Greenpeace insists on zero mortality for dolphins at the expense of the industry. Fishermen's livelihoods and the health of the ocean don't matter.

EIR: How many people did you get out for this demonstration against the Greenpeace crowd?

Platt: Two hundred. . . . They were really shocked. They said, "Why are you protesting us? We're the 'good guys'!" We told them that we were tired of the lies they told about us, they didn't know what they were talking about, they were putting fishermen out of business, they were ruining the ocean, and they were doing it by misdirected ignorance.

We told them to sit down and read the reports, and think on how to do this [protect dolphin populations without destroying the tuna fishery] in the long term. They should ask the fishermen, "What do *you* think about 'dolphin-safe'? What would work, and what wouldn't?" They never sat down with us or the scientists. Instead, people not involved with the fishery and one man in a corporate jet decided the definition of "dolphin-safe," a definition that impacted so many fishermen, people in the canneries, and the health of the eastern tropical Pacific.

EIR: Has Greenpeace been back to San Diego since your demonstration?

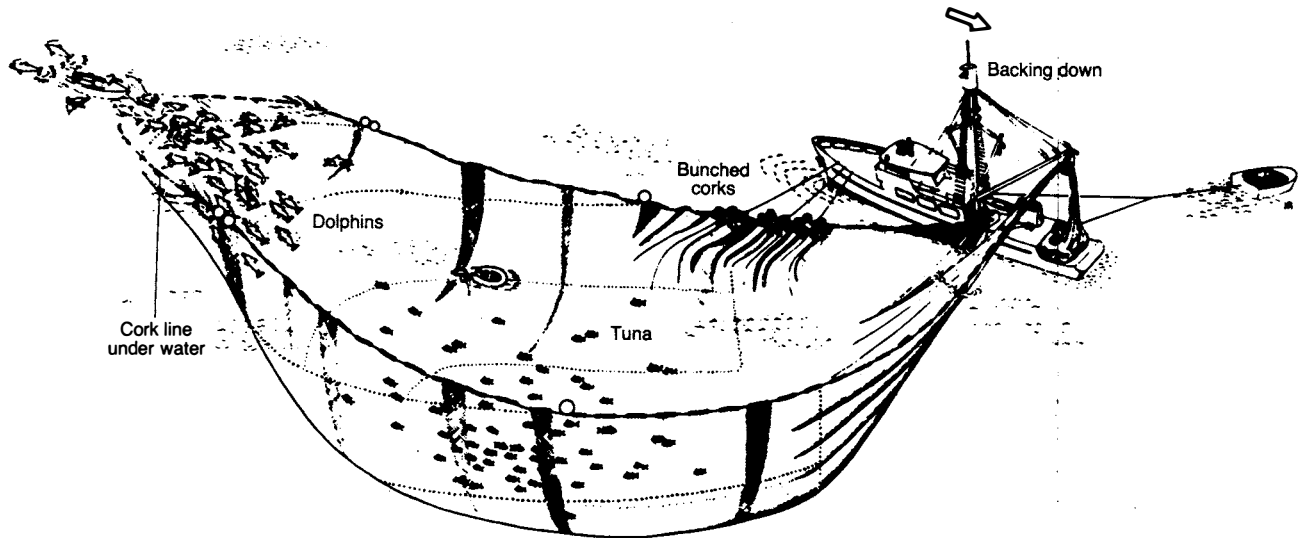
Platt: No, they haven't. From San Diego, they went to Ensenada. We talked to the people there, and they did better than we did. They have a cannery down there, so they had 300 people on the dock, and the officials had to shut down the port because they thought there would be a riot!

EIR: As I understand it, the U.S. tuna fleet has historically fished in the eastern Pacific. Can you give us some background on this fishery?

Platt: The California fishermen traditionally fished in the eastern tropical Pacific, the "ETP" for short. This is an area running from southern California to Chile and out to Hawaii. The ETP is approximately 8 million square miles of ocean.

FIGURE 1

Purse seine showing the backdown maneuver and release of dolphins



Source: National Marine Fisheries Service

It produces about 25% of the world's canned tuna supply, and is the world's biggest yellowfin tuna fishery. About 80 to 100 large boats from eight to nine countries share this fishery.

EIR: How many dolphins are there in the eastern tropical Pacific, and what kind of impact does tuna fishing have on the ability of the dolphin population to reproduce itself?

Platt: There is a lot of data on the dolphin population. The fishery has been studied since 1949 by the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC). The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), of course, has also been involved, but having one country's group trying to manage the fishery doesn't work. The IATTC works with eight or nine different flags out there, and 13 countries depend on the fish.

The IATTC has a data base that goes back to 1949, and from the data you can see the results of El Niño weather patterns on fishing activity, and of political patterns on the fishing activity. The data indicate that there are around 9.6 million dolphins in the eastern tropical Pacific, and that the yellowfin tuna fishery has no negative biological impact on the dolphin populations.

EIR: Does the IATTC set tuna catch quotas for this fishery?

Platt: Yes.

EIR: What are the quotas?

Platt: Back in the 1970s the quotas were as low as 70,000

to 80,000 tons per year, and the Americans and the other fishermen who subscribed to this agreement lived by that. It was a very low quota. Of course, the boats were smaller, but they did hit that quota quite often. That was the quota for yellowfin. Skipjack tuna is not a resident, and it varies widely in its numbers.

EIR: Do you mean, the skipjack tuna is not a resident species of the ETP?

Platt: It comes and it goes. The quantity of skipjack harvested varies very widely in the fishery every year, so it's sort of an adjunct to what we catch, which is primarily yellowfin tuna. We now take about 300,000 tons of yellowfin tuna per year, and we haven't been shut down by a quota since the mid-eighties. The fishermen have been catching the tuna at just the right time in their life-cycles to keep the tuna population healthy.

Unfortunately, the point when yellowfin tuna in the ETP should be harvested is when they are quite large and swim in association with herds of dolphins. And if the tuna boat skipper and his crew don't know how to get the dolphins out of the net, you will have a high mortality rate for the intermixed dolphins.

EIR: For the benefit of readers who may not be acquainted with the technicalities of how purse-seine fishing for tuna works, could you give us a little background on this? For example, what are the specific procedures for reducing—

essentially eliminating—the dolphin mortality?

Platt: Tuna fishermen originally caught the fish with pole and line, which did harvest a lot of small fish and used a lot of bait to catch the fish. It was very labor-intensive and highly risky for the fishermen [such vessels are known as “bait-boats”]. It was not particularly effective, so they eventually moved to the purse-seine net. *Seine* is a French word for “a net which hangs,” with corks or floats along the top and weights along the bottom.

Using the purse seine, the tunaboat encircles the tuna (swimming in association with dolphins) with the net, and then closes or “purses” the bottom of the net, so that the tuna can’t get out. But when you do that, you get dolphin in the net, as well as tuna. How do you get the dolphin out?

Well, the purse-seine net was introduced [to this fishery] in 1957. The same year the tuna fishermen introduced a procedure known as “back-down” (**Figure 1**). They put the boat into reverse gear and drag the net through the water so that the net becomes elongated into a channel. This creates a “waterfall” effect at the far end of the net, and the dolphin escape that way. In addition to that, fishermen check the perimeter of the net for the dolphin, and pull any stragglers up to the surface and help them over the side of the net. Doing that effectively, you can release 99.8% of any dolphins caught.

EIR: What’s the approximate percentage mortality to the dolphin population now, due to tuna fishing in the eastern tropical Pacific?

Platt: There’s been plenty of scientific work done on this. The data from the early years of the fishery are just about worthless: There weren’t enough samplings, there weren’t enough cruises to determine what the stocks were. And that goes up to about 1972. The scientific community has rejected most of the early data on dolphins as useless.

From 1972-78, the sampling got a little bit better, and from those figures it looks like the tuna fishery may have been killing as many as 100,000 dolphins a year during the early period.

EIR: Out of 10 million?

Platt: Yes, so that’s still only at 1% of the dolphins. You have to look at their reproductive rate. Cetaceans, which are dolphins, porpoises, and whales, reproduce at anywhere from as low as 2% to as high as 9%.

EIR: Per year?

Platt: Yes—the births versus the deaths, natural mortality. So, if we take, conservatively, a figure of killing 2% of the dolphin population every year, there would be just as many dolphins next year as this year. The herd wouldn’t increase, but you’d have just as many. In fact, if you got too many, you might want to *increase* that take. So, just as you would do, say, in a field harvest on shore: If we have too many,

let’s take 20% this year, perhaps, just as with scientific range management with any land mammal; it’s no different.

EIR: But, in fact, fishermen were taking only 1% of the dolphin population, even before the IATTC education program went into effect?

Platt: Yes, in fact, it was 1%. You can break it down by various genetic stocks and say, “Okay, this one is going a little over 2%; we’ve got to bring the take down.” And they do that. They track the dolphin population by various genetic stocks, different species, and different breakdowns. The U.S. fleet dolphin mortality was down to about 20,000 in 1979, before this became an international problem. That’s 20,000 dolphin deaths a year out of a dolphin population of approximately 10 million.

The American tuna fishermen got more and more political pressure on this issue, and they started to explore the western Pacific skipjack fishery. In the early 1980s we had a bad “El Niño effect” in the eastern tropical Pacific, and a lot of the boats moved to the western Pacific; we just didn’t have any fish in the eastern Pacific. This became an international issue when foreign fleets entered the fishery. Mexicans, Venezuelans, Colombians all ran into the same dolphin problem, when they started fishing in the eastern Pacific. By 1986, their kill rates [for net sets on dolphins] were up to 130,000 dolphins a year. So, you had the whole process starting again. Immediately the scientists and the fishermen went back to the question, “How do we teach these people how to lower dolphin mortality?” The thing that could be said, is: “Look, there is a problem, we know how to get the dolphins out of the nets, we simply have to teach more people how to do it.”

EIR: But it’s been done?

Platt: Yes. Luckily, we had the international cooperation; we had the State Department there; we had the fisheries ministers from over a dozen countries; we had all these people who were addressing this problem. I have to admit that there was pressure to solve this problem, and we were lucky enough to get resources on the issue. We were also unlucky enough to get a smear campaign, too.

Over the years, with the help of the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission education program, much has been done. The scientists analyzed the problems which occur when freak currents would pull the net in one direction. Nature would come in, and all of a sudden the current would change, wind conditions would change, and the skipper would run into problems. On average, 1-3% of the sets, “problem sets” caused by freak wind and current conditions, were causing 30% of the dolphin mortalities. If you had a skipper who didn’t quite know how to respond to these freak conditions, he might lose eight dolphins in one set, whereas a good skipper, who did know how to respond, would lose only one.

So the IATTC analyzed what the tunaboats were doing,

and looked through all the old data to see how these people had responded to situations like this in the past. The IATTC then taught the fishermen how to respond to these situations. Immediately, the mortality rate plummeted: It was cut in half year after year. By 1991, dolphin mortality was at 27,000 animals for the *whole international fleet*; in 1992, it was 15,000; and, this year, it looks like it will be somewhere between 5,000 and 8,000. Fifteen thousand animals last year represented 0.16% of the stocks; 5,000 to 8,000—let's take 8,000—represents 0.08% of the stocks.

But, you know, getting the scientific data from all these different boats, analyzing it, developing a program, and taking that program to the various countries involved—and doing this with the various languages—taking it to skippers who are generally at sea fishing: Now that's an educational process that's difficult, and requires a lot of international cooperation.

EIR: So, the scientific evidence indicates that the yellowfin tuna purse-seine fishery in the eastern tropical Pacific has no negative effect at all on the dolphin stocks?

Platt: It's near zero. The National Academy of Sciences did a report on this subject—it took them two and one-half years and came out in 1992—and the National Academy report said exactly the same thing that we did, when we had already come to an agreement with the fishermen: Train your skippers better. That's the direction we went, and we put a lot of support behind the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission to move the educational program to fishermen in other oceans, even though they weren't members of the IATTC.

People were so pleased; despite the relatively small budget for something like this (\$2.7 million total for the IATTC annually), the program was actually working! And the program was very effective: The scientists [who conduct the training sessions with the skippers] were unbiased, they didn't make cultural judgments, they spoke the languages of the people they were talking to, they used good hard science, and it worked.

By February 1992, everybody said, "Let's move toward an international agreement for the management of the oceans." The National Academy of Sciences report had just come out, and it said that there should be an international approach, that one should use education, and should not outlaw encirclement: The report said that if you outlaw the encirclement of dolphins, you will force fishermen off big yellowfin tuna, and onto the small fish. There would be a reduction in production of yellowfin tuna by about 30-60%, and you would cause an environmental disaster. [The larger, more mature fish habitually associate with dolphins, while the younger, immature fish do not. Hence, if you set the net "on dolphin," the practical effect is the protection of the tuna stocks, by harvesting the adult fish; if you force the tunaboats to harvest the younger fish, you are harvesting these fish before they have had a chance to reproduce—ed.]



Teresa Platt (right) of the Fishermen's Coalition receiving the "Wise Use Grass Roots Activist of the Year" award from Kathleen Marquardt, chairman of Putting People First, at the July 23-25 Wise Use Leadership Conference in Reno, Nevada.

EIR: Then, if fishermen do what the environmentalists were demanding, they would actually be damaging the stocks of yellowfin tuna, as well as affecting other species which are not a problem with the dolphin encirclement procedure?

Platt: Exactly.

EIR: A film was circulated some years ago by an environmentalist group, which showed footage of large-scale dolphin mortality from a tunaboat "setting" its nets on dolphins. What's the story on that?

Platt: Environmentalists went aboard a Panamanian tunaboat and came back with a horror film of dead dolphins. I remember the American fishermen who saw the film saying, "We don't fish like that. Everybody knows we don't fish like that." Of course, everyone was outraged. We were outraged. We tried to get the people who owned the boat arrested, but we didn't have any luck. We tried to do that through the National Fisheries Service in Panama. . . . But anyway, that boat went out of business and that was the end of that.

But this film of this one boat continued to move—moved to Europe, where people were told we were killing between 300,000 and 1 million dolphins a year, completely out of control, with no observers on the boat.

EIR: In other words, the accusations made in the film were

a complete fraud?

Platt: Yes. We subpoenaed Earth Island Institute last year [regarding the film], and we've been trying for a full year to get discovery on them.

EIR: What's the real story behind the film's footage?

Platt: The boat in the movie was Panamanian. The United States had an agreement at the time with Panama, and, by the third trip, the boat would have had an observer aboard. The film was made on the boat's first trip. Panama, at that time, had no training program for its skippers. Panama didn't enforce any of the requirements (as you know, Panama was in the middle of a drug war). So, the boat went out with the wrong equipment and an inexperienced crew, and they didn't perform the back-down procedure. The captain on one leg of the trip was a Basque, with a cultural attitude toward dolphins where they ate them for dinner. They could kill dolphins, and then eat them—that's what they do in their part of the country.

EIR: In short, the environmentalists filmed a tuna set in which there was substantial dolphin mortality.

Platt: They filmed it and said it was representative of the tuna fleet in the eastern tropical Pacific, which was simply false. One scientist worked up the numbers and basically said that, if we all fished like that boat had, we would have killed 11 million dolphins per year, based on the tonnage of tuna that that boat caught! But the market took care of that boat a lot faster than any political movement could.

EIR: The boat went out of business?

Platt: It went bankrupt. They couldn't catch any fish. Nobody wanted to stay on the boat. It is no fun removing dead dolphins from the net. You want to be on a boat that runs right. You have to get these dolphins out of the net dead or alive, and it is easier to do it when they are alive. It also nets you more tuna, so, it's to your advantage. There are nearly 10 million dolphins (in the eastern tropical Pacific), and the take by tunaboats is minuscule.

EIR: Some years ago, Star-Kist began marketing what they called "dolphin-safe" tuna. Can you explain what this was, and the impact it had?

Platt: They adopted that in 1990, and it really came out of the blue. It was always sort of a "poison pill" for the rest of the industry. That's the way I heard one of the canners talk about it once. Star-Kist then basically "washed their hands" of the whole thing [the yellowfin fishery] and walked away from it. They said, "Forget it," because there was so much misinformation out there. The environmental groups used the issue because it was a real money-raiser, even though conservation-wise there wasn't a real problem with the dolphin population. For humane reasons, you want to get the kill rate down as far as possible, of course, but in terms of conservation there was no problem.

EIR: What happened when Star-Kist said that they were going to buy only "dolphin-safe" tuna?

Platt: Star-Kist said they would not buy tuna caught with drift nets over a certain length. [Drift nets are long, shallow nets which are set from the boat offshore, and literally are cast adrift, i.e., physically separated from the boat. The boat may set several or many such nets, and come back later to pull the nets and harvest the catch. There is no U.S.-flag drift-net fishery—ed.] The second part of the "dolphin-safe" definition, which Star-Kist helped to define and put into a labelling law, was that they would only buy fish caught in the eastern Pacific if there was an observer on board who said there was no encirclement of dolphins during the entire trip.

So most of the U.S. fleet packed up and went to the skipjack fishery in the western Pacific, where you don't generally find dolphins associating with tuna. But reports started surfacing from other areas [than the eastern tropical Pacific] about dolphin kills. The yellowfin tuna seem to associate quite often with dolphins. But how much, and how many dolphins were being killed, we had no idea.

Gill nets that are used in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean traditionally take maybe 2% of the marine mammal stock off the coastline. According to the Star-Kist and subsequent



The tunaboat Proud Heritage, part of the U.S. fleet in the eastern tropical Pacific.

TABLE 1

Comparison of tuna sets on logs, on schools, and on dolphins

	Sets on logs	Sets on schools	Sets on dolphins
Modal size captured	50 cm	60 cm	100 cm
Modal weight	2.5 kg	4.2 kg	27.7 kg
Yield per recruit	very low	very low	close to maximum
Reproductive condition	immature	immature	mature
Avg. discard per set (all tunas)	26%	2.5%	<0.1%

Industry sources explained to EIR that the optimal point at which to harvest yellowfin tuna is when the tuna are full-grown, or nearly so, and reproductively mature. Yellowfin tuna, at this stage, habitually swim in association with dolphins. Hence, to maximize the "clean" yield of mature yellowfin, the prudent skipper "sets" his purse seine "on dolphins": He encircles both tuna and dolphins with his seine, then uses the "backdown" maneuver to allow the dolphins to escape. It is also possible to "set on a school," in which the seine encircles a free-swimming school of tuna (without dolphins). This marginally reduces dolphin mortality, but massively increases the wasteful "by-catch" of other species and young, immature tuna. A "set on a log" or on other floating sea debris, in which the tuna are under the debris, has the same negative impact as the "set on a school."

Source: Data from Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Sept. 1993

labelling law definitions, that gill-net fish can go into a can and be called "dolphin-safe," while I can go into the eastern Pacific and encircle 40-50,000 dolphins in one trip, let them all go, with no mortality, and *not* be "dolphin safe," according to the labelling law.

EIR: It seems like the "dolphin-safe" label is a kind of consumer fraud, coupled with economic warfare against the yellowfin tuna fishery.

Platt: It was a simplistic solution to a complicated problem, and "animal rights" people were right there at the side of Star-Kist, trying to define the encirclement of dolphins to be obscene, saying that we shouldn't be near them, we shouldn't bother them. But you see, we do have observers on the big boats, and all this stuff goes into a data base. It showed up very quickly that the cost of being "dolphin-safe" was that we lost the presence of the United States in the eastern Pacific: The U.S. tuna fleet moved to another ocean. In the eastern tropical Pacific, the definition of "dolphin-safe" forced the fishermen to start fishing on smaller fish—"babies," really—fish that they used to pass up because they knew better, but that's what they were forced to put on board (see **Table 1**). In addition, we started experiencing a by-catch [incidental catch] of sharks, billfish, and all sorts of other species of fish

TABLE 2

If we replace dolphin sets with sets on logs, the incidental mortality of dolphins is almost eliminated, but at the expense of other species

1 dolphin	=	26,000	tunas
	+	103	mahi mahi
	+	28	sharks
	+	24	wahoo
	+	0.6	yellowtail
	+	6.0	rainbow runner
	+	1.2	billfishes
	+	0.2	sea turtles

Source: Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, Sept. 1993

(see **Table 2**). We never had this problem before.

By adopting these so-called dolphin-safe fishing practices, you are forcing fishermen away from exactly what they should be doing for conservation. All this went into the data base, and the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission did a wonderful slide showing that one dolphin saved (through not using dolphin encirclement) equals 26,000 small tuna over the side, 1.2 billfish, 103 mahi mahi, 28 sharks, etc. So, very quickly the IATTC said that if the entire fleet fishes "dolphin-safe," it will reduce the production of tuna by 30-60%, and they had no idea what the impact would be on other species. "Dolphin-safe" tuna, by the current definition, is not sound.

I think "dolphin-safe" was a "good try" for Star-Kist: It had a lot to do with their hopes of increasing their market share of tuna sold, and hopes of great glory as being labeled as "the green company." The truth is that tuna sales were up 20% in the years prior to the "dolphin-safe" announcement. And now they've been steady—sometimes down—with no real growth. It caused a lot of confusion, and it put a label on the consumer's can that basically underscores the negative aspect of the harvesting process. It's not the best marketing plan they could choose.

What they should have done is to say, "We're going to buy fish only from boats where the fishermen use the correct gear and correct techniques, have an observer aboard, and are participating in the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission education program." In other words, they should have said, "We're going to buy only from vendors who are doing a good job."

The Fishermen's Coalition is now working on getting the "dolphin-safe" definition changed for the eastern tropical Pacific. Whenever the fishermen catch tuna and release all dolphin unharmed, this should be defined as "dolphin-safe." This definition lets the fishermen earn a living, and keeps the ocean healthy.