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Not on My Table: Xiphias Gladius, Extensive Fishing Harvesting a Major Threat to Mediterranean Swordfish

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Key points

Mediterranean Swordfish is a fish species whose importance is vital to the conservation of maritime ecosystem and natural resources. It also helps the socioeconomic growth of the states that take advantage of it (mainly Italy). Apart from the environmental disaster, the low fish stock levels create financial difficulty to the fishers themselves and the Mediterranean fish market as a whole. Trying to combat this problem, the EU has limited the authorised catches of this species, sadly creating a gap in the economies depended on their fish market. Under these circumstances, the latter increased the imports of swordfish (from Morocco and Algeria mainly), reducing its price.

In any way the problem is not at all solved and needs to be settled as soon as possible so as to prevent the distinction of the Mediterranean swordfish and simultaneously not let the maritime economies get devastated. This policy brief recommends:

- Close collaboration between European and international NGOs and states so as to affect the public
- Firm monitoring in order to prevent illegal fishing
- Fiscal measures that will discourage individuals from consume this species
- Reduction of the authorized to fishing Mediterranean swordfish vessels
- Endorse the consumption of the under-fished species

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Introduction

It is the 3rd article of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union that defines that all marine biological resources must be conserved under the common fisheries policy. But what happens with Mediterranean swordfish (or *xiphias gladius*)? The latter has been one of the most discussed and “famous” fish, while it can be sold for €24 per kilo. Although its consumption is not forbidden, it should be critically diminished.

Not only Oceana and The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas have been up to these issues; but also European Union has recognized the combat over overfishing of the latter by being a Contracting Party to it since 1997. In addition, the UN include in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, as the 14 goal, the conservation and the sustainably use of the oceans, seas and marine resources. What does that mean? That the problem does actually exist as it's internationally recognized. Baby steps are done, but the efficiency of our acts has to be multiplied if we want swordfish not to be long-gone in Mare Nostrum.

Why Should I Care?

There is a thrill around swordfish; it's considered as a “gourmet” fish and is sold from €14 up to €24 when fresh. By nature, it is predator, a muscular, streamlined with robust tail fish. It can reach speeds up to 97km/h, making it one of the most fast-running fish. However, the extensive fishing, the use of harmful trawling gears as well as the captivity of juveniles (in fishing terms, the fish younger than 3 years) have led them in the extreme danger of extinction. In other words, not only they are being abused, but also they cannot reproduce as they are being captive in a very young age.

According to Oceana's database, between 1980-2010 the 15% of the total catches of swordfish were illegal, to wit 44778 tons. Also, it is maintained that the list of authorized vessels to fish Mediterranean swordfish are five times more than needed. Not before the 1970's the fishing of swordfish was so lengthy. Reaching the highest price of 20.365 tons of catches in 1988, the numbers were never again so large-scale thenceforth. However, it should be pointed that in 2015 the annual catches of swordfish were only 9.966 t (compared to the relevant number in 1988). Italy is the major rival of swordfish fishing the 45% of annual swordfish worldwide. Morocco, Spain, Greece and Tunisia follow. Given that, there is no wondering how over the 1/3 of the total fish' population has been vanished in only 3 decades. This let us assume that if we not make overfishing stop, soon the remaining will not be able to reproduce, and the species will not eventually make it and survive.



Catches - Mediterranean and Black Sea (from 2000 onwards)

[fish_ca_at137]

Last update: 16.11.18

Source of data: Eurostat

SPECIES: Swordfish - *Xiphias gladius* **FISHREG:** Mediterranean and Black Sea **UNIT:** Tonnes
live weight

	TIME	
GEO	2008	2009
European Union (current composition)	:	:
Bulgaria	:	:
Greece	439.26	718.71
Spain	1.890	1.998.3
France	14	13.4
Croatia	:	3.1
Italy	4.714.8	5.325.3
Cyprus	56.2	26.2
Malta	260.2	265.9
Portugal	:	:
Romania	:	:
Slovenia	:	:
Turkey	772	602

	TIME
GEO	2017
European Union (current composition)	5,568.39
Bulgaria	:
Greece	461.38
Spain	1,467.3
France	221.87
Croatia	20.07
Italy	2,986.7
Cyprus	49.6
Malta	361.48
Portugal	:
Romania	:
Slovenia	:

What Applies?

Needless to refer that swordfish is a cornerstone for many fishers and agriculture families and helps to socioeconomic growth to the Mediterranean countries who take advantage of it (mainly Italy, Spain and Greece). As a consequence, the restricted quotas of its catching, put a lot of pressure to all these families and markets. However, more strict measures must be taken in order to protect this species.

In first place I would like to cite the actual legal basis of fisheries policy and then recommend my proposals. According to 3rd article of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union all the states-members must follow common policy, as set by the Union that has the right to conclude international agreements when need be so as to enhance its efficiency. Under this nature, Council decided on 23rd March 1998 to approve the Convention on the Law of the Sea of United Nations, concerning the maintenance and governance of marine living biological resources. Except for this commitment, EU became a Contracting Party to the ICCAT Convention (International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) on November 1997 (86/238/EEC). It is clear that in the frame of all their international obligations, all Member States are obliged to support and promote the conservation of fish stocks and marine biomass. Besides, ICCAT's resolutions- recommendations are binding for all the contracting parties and are implanted six months after their adoption. Regarding to the EU, the ICCAT's recommendations have to be incorporated to Union's law the sooner.



On the eve of continuously increasing xiphias gladius' overfishing, the parties of ICCAT decided in 2016 to take more active steps and adopted a 15-year agenda defining the bylaws under which the maximum sustainable yield of swordfish' stock will be achieved. The likelihood that this goal will be accomplished by 2031 is 60%.

Recommendations

Although the probability is somewhat satisfying, we will only be gratified when this percentage is complete. Many things are to be done and the solution lies in our arms. Way a lot more pressure should be brought to bear not only the international and binding actors (e.g. Council, International Maritime Organization, Security Council etc.) but also the individuals as well. And if we cannot persuade the fishers and the maritime economy to exclude at all the swordfish, we must raise awareness among the consumers in order to “ostracize” the former species of their menu list.

- To work closely together with environmental NGOs who can affect the public opinion for example: WWF, Greenpeace International, European Biomass Association and International Maritime Rescue Federation in order to inform and change their eating habits, and prompt them to always check the MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) and ASC labels.
- To be closely engaged with International Association of Airport and Seaport Police so as to prevent any illegal try or act to catch swordfish beyond the permitted limits.
- To launch alerting commercials to all European television frequencies in peak hours and to the public transport (mainly the metro).
- To impose extra taxes on undersized swordfish (juveniles) with a view to deter the market to promote it and the consumers to buy it.
- To minimize the vessels which are authorized to fish swordfish in the Mediterranean Sea, and impose large fines to whose authorization date has expired, or never had one.
- To promote the fish' species which compose the 10% of fish stocks that are underfished (in contrast to the 29% which is overfished or the 61% which is on the brink of).



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