

The Politics of Bluefin Tuna in Malta

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ABSTRACT:

This paper analyzes the politics of bluefin tuna in Malta within the first years of EU accession (2004-9). The paper concludes that despite making certain impacts, ENGOs (environmental non-governmental organizations) were unsuccessful in creating a hegemonic formation to stop the fishing of bluefin tuna until stocks recover.

Keywords: bluefin tuna; Malta; Environmental NGOs; EU; hegemony

1. The articulation of fishing of bluefin tuna as an environmental issue

Malta, the smallest EU member state, has become a global giant when it comes to tuna ranching, amidst antagonism and lobbying from different interests and regulatory measures on national, European and global levels. The bluefin tuna industry is relatively new, and Malta has little policy-experience in the area. Yet, due to the island's geographical position one could only expect that it would eventually become a hub of bluefin tuna fishing.

Prior to Malta's EU accession, Malta's fishing sector was witnessing industrialisation processes alongside its small-scale traditional sector. Maggie Borg (1996) analysed the rise of the aquaculture industry in the 1990s, which, at that time, was characterised by intensive monoculture fish farming. By then, the negative impacts on the marine environment of intensive monoculture were already being noted. Borg concluded that 'decisions taken hardly ever reflect social and environmental impacts' (Borg 1996: 183). She also noted how two cultures were in opposition, one representing traditional fishermen and the other representing the capital-accumulating aquaculture industry. Conflict was taking place within the State through agencies such as the Planning Authority (later on renamed the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA)).

When Malta joined the EU, its fishing regulations had to change to be in line with EU legislation. This had a dislocatory effect in that traditional fishermen had to compete with industrialized fleets. The Government of Malta negotiated a 25-mile fishing zone around its coast for conservation purposes, which only permitted vessels smaller than 12 meters to fish in this zone through small-scale fishing (National Commission for Sustainable Development 2004: 31). Yet, as the industrialization of fishing was on the advance, and bluefin tuna became a lucrative source of revenue for businesses working in the sector. Malta's change in external relations meant that it now had to follow EU decisions, including those in global agreements.

ENGOs started to show concern over what they saw as unsustainable fishing of bluefin tuna through crisis-ridden discourse. They created an empty signifier (Laclau 2005) which can be called 'ban bluefin tuna fishing until stocks recover'. Greenpeace expressed much concern on this issue, saying that bluefin tuna stocks were down by 80 per cent due to overfishing. The ENGO demanded a ban of fishing in 40 per cent of the

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marine reserves in the Mediterranean (Reuters 2006). According to a report by Advanced Tuna Ranching Technologies, which was endorsed by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), Malta was the largest tuna rancher in the world, accounting for 6,400,000kgs of the fish. The report also criticised Malta for underreporting tuna catches (Debono 2008). On the other hand, WWF blamed Turkey, Italy, Croatia, Libya, France and Spain for being the worst culprits in terms of tuna fleet overcapacity in the Mediterranean (The Times 2008). Much of this tuna is exported to Japan for the lucrative sushi market, and Malta earns an estimated 100 million Euro a year from tuna exports to this country. Hence, whilst Malta's tuna fishing fleet is tiny by international standards, the same cannot be said for its tuna-ranching industry, which is one of the largest in the world (Vassallo 2008d).

2. Fishing of bluefin tuna in the EU and Malta: Chains of equivalence and ENGOs

Malta's dominant political parties – the Nationalist Party (which was in Government between 1987 and 2013, save for a 22-month interval between 1996 and 1998), and the Labour Party (which is now in Government) – directly or indirectly supported big business development in tuna farming, even though Labour, originally had a different position, for example in its opposition to a batch of applications in 2002. One of these was turned down by the Planning Authority, another was withdrawn, and another not considered, to the delight of Maltese conservationist ENGO Nature Trust, the National Cooperative of Fishermen and the Professional Diving Schools Association (Cini 2002). Other ENGOs and Malta's Green Party (which has never been elected to parliament) also opposed such development – with the support of the European, Spanish and Italian Green Parties (Boissevain 2004: 247-254).

ENGOs were involved in environmental class conflict (Layfield 2008) against big-business interests, from the fishing industry, which was actively supported by the Nationalist Government, and the Fisheries Commission of the EU, in a context of neo-liberal ideology that overshadowed conservationist claims. A symbiotic relationship was in place between tuna big-business and the state, in that the former promised economic growth and the latter provided political support.

Global ENGOs Greenpeace and WWF were mostly active on this front. Maltese conservationist ENGOs Nature Trust, Din l-Art Helwa and the The Biological Conservation Research Foundation (Bicref) did speak up on the issue, as did the Green Party, yet there was no focused and well-organised ENGO campaign in Malta, thus resulting in a relative 'discursive silence' (Tonkiss 1998: 258) of the Maltese environmental movement, when compared to other issues analysed in this study.

Interestingly, and in what exemplifies the active role of the media in civil society activism, the Malta Today newspaper, through its reports, was very concerned about the issue. The EU's Environment Commission was also on the side of those calling for sustainable fishing. Even though there were no formal alliances in this respect, chains of equivalence (Laclau and Mouffe 1985) were being formed around the nodal point that demanded the protection of bluefin tuna from unsustainable fishing, in line with conservationist ideology. As shown below, both the EU and the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) were characterised by the condensation of conflicts (Poulantzas 2000: 151) for the setting up of bluefin tuna quota catches, which, however, and as explained below, did not result in a hegemonic formation against big business interests.

3. Antagonisms in the setting of targets for bluefin tuna catches

In response to the concerns regarding unsustainable bluefin tuna catches, the Nationalist MEP David Casa believed that whilst illegal activities should be stopped and fishing for all species should be sustainable, 'all support possible should be given to Malta's emerging market' (Vella 2006). Malta's Government also deemed sensationalist the accusations from WWF that Malta was allowing illegal flights from spotter planes and also receiving illegal fish catches especially from Libya. These accusations were put forward in front of the Fisheries Committee of the European Parliament (Camilleri 2006a).

In the meantime, then Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg – who is Maltese – referred to scientific evidence of the International Commission for Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT) on depletion of bluefin tuna stocks in the Mediterranean and called for concrete action to protect the species. At face value this vindicated WWF's warning on collapse of bluefin tuna stocks should current fishing trends persist (Camilleri 2006b). However, WWF soon slammed the EU for blocking a deduction of annual tuna catches to 15,000 tonnes in 2010, as recommended by ICCAT scientists. Instead, a deal was reached for a gradual deduction to 25,500 tonnes from the then current 32,000 tonnes. In WWF's words, this was 'a collapse plan, not a recovery plan' (Kambas 2006). At the same time, Maltese fishermen called for the resignation of Joe Borg as they deemed that their yearly 344 tonne-quota had not been added to the EU quota, and they were therefore being discriminated against for not having a fixed quota, unlike fishermen in other countries (Farrugia 2006). Indeed, Malta's quota was expected to decrease to 310 tonnes in 2007 and to decrease further subsequently (Camilleri 2006c), to the harsh criticism of the Government of Malta which supported the fishermen's demand for a fixed 344-tonne quota (Camilleri 2006d).

Eventually, after a meeting of ICCAT, and following insistence by the Maltese Government, Malta was allocated a quota of 355.59 tonnes for 2007, which would eventually decrease to 307.38 tonnes in 2010. Minister George Pullicino insisted that the Government would keep defending the 'legitimate interests of Maltese fishermen' (Fenech 2007). The European Commission consequently confirmed Malta's quota (Camilleri 2007a). Yet the European Council of Ministers initially could not reach agreement on quotas for a 15-year plan to help rebuild stocks, resulting in a threat from the European Commission to close down the season for the year. Subsequently, agreement was reached, and Malta retained its 355-tonne quota, though this would have to be reduced by 25 per cent in the following four years (Camilleri 2007d).

NGOs were not satisfied with this. Greenpeace said that bluefin stocks were facing collapse, and called for all shipping fleets 'to be called back to port' in view of Government's lack of ability to guarantee sustainable fishing, to the detriment of economic and cultural factors. Greenpeace also said that the EU was simply following the ICCAT agreement, which was unsustainable (Micallef 2007). In the meantime, the ENGO reported widespread illegal tuna fishing off Malta's coast, though not by Maltese boats (Zammit 2007). Maltese ENGO Bicref also lamented on the 'bluefin tuna decline in the Mediterranean', alongside other increasing threatened species, and called for new options and solutions to conserve and rehabilitate 'our "engine of life" – Mother Nature' (Vella 2007).

In 2007, the European Commission initiated infringement procedures against Malta and five other EU member states for failing to provide information on bluefin tuna catches (Euractiv.com 2007). Malta's Government however replied that it regularly submits such data to the European Commission. Moreover, the European Commis-

sion was reported as stating that according to preliminary reports and estimates, Malta was within the 355.5 tonne limit for the year (Camilleri 2007e). By the end of the year, however, the European Court of Auditors raised doubts on fishing figures in the EU. Indeed, it stated that data on the six biggest fishing EU member states (Malta is not one of them) was not reliable (Camilleri 2007f). In 2008, the European Commission once again warned Malta that it would face legal procedures if it did not follow new rules (Camilleri 2008a).

NGOs were stepping up their campaign for sustainable fishing, which amongst species, included bluefin tuna. Greenpeace activists (who were subsequently arrested) blocked an EU building with concrete breeze-blocks and the slogan 'Shut down until fish stocks recover' during an EU agriculture and fisheries meeting. As a Greenpeace spokesperson put it, 'Unless changes are made and power is ceded to Europe's environment ministers, Europe's fisheries face a biodiversity and economic collapse' (Reuters 2007). In April 2008 Greenpeace activists also raided a stand of 5 tuna exporters, including Maltese company Azzopardi Fisheries, during a seafood exhibition in Brussels (Camilleri 2008b). WWF unsuccessfully called for a 3-year ban on bluefin tuna fishing, and subsequently urged retailers to stop selling Mediterranean bluefin tuna, and praised those which already did so (Reuters 2008).

In the meantime, both Greenpeace and WWF expressed concern on unregistered 'pirate' purse seine fishing vessels, and WWF identified two which were docked in Malta and which, according to the NGO were most likely to be related to French, Maltese and Libyan interests (Malta Today 2008a). Two vessels owned by Azzopardi Fisheries were reported by Greenpeace and WWF for being illegally registered. Malta's Ministry for Resources and Rural Affairs instructed the Malta Maritime Authority not to accept them as fishing vessels with the Maltese flag (Vassallo 2008a). Subsequently, Malta's Attorney General initiated legal proceedings against Charles and Anthony Azzopardi, owners of "Hannibal Fishing Ltd" on four vessels – two owned by the company, and two new ones bought from Turkey with French partners (Malta Today 2008e).

In June 2008 the European Commission closed the bluefin tuna season for industrial trawlers, given that it was informed that the permitted quotas for the year had been reached. Malta only had one registered purse seiner, which meant that most Maltese fishermen, who used traditional fishing methods were not affected by this ban. Yet, the same could not be said for the large number of tuna ranching farms in Malta (Camilleri 2008c). In a meeting of EU fisheries ministers, Maltese minister George Pullicino expressed his reservations on this, claiming that only 70 per cent of the allocated tuna quota for Malta was fished (Vella 2008). Besides, Azzopardi Fisheries – one of the world's top five tuna ranching industries – unsuccessfully wrote to the European Commission for financial compensation (Vassallo 2008b). Some weeks later, experts commissioned by ICCAT said that Mediterranean tuna fishing should be suspended and sanctuaries should be set up to save the species from extinction (Camilleri 2008g). ICCAT also estimated that 51 per cent of all bluefin tuna caught in the Mediterranean in 2007 was illegal and unauthorised (Camilleri 2008f)

In the run up to the forthcoming ICCAT meeting in November 2008, even the economically-liberal 'The Economist' magazine, joined WWF, Greenpeace and others in the call for control over the bluefin tuna industry through a temporary closure so as to allow the replenishing of stocks. As it put it: 'The gold rush is over. The plunder should stop, and bluefin should be given time to build themselves up again' (2008 cited in Vassallo 2008h).

At the ICCAT meeting in Marrakesh, Morocco, European Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg said retaining the status quo on tuna fishing in the Mediterranean was not an option (Camilleri 2008e). Yet, when it came to the crunch, the EU allied itself with various countries to have ICCAT decide for a 22,000 tonne-quota for 2009, way above the 8,500 to 15,000 tonne quota as recommended by scientists. After the meeting, WWF denounced the European Commission for allegedly threatening developing states with trade retaliations if they supported lower catches and extended closed seasons (Phillips 2008).

Yet, not all was plain sailing within the European Commission. In what seemed to be an internal conflict within the European Commission, it was reported that Environment Commissioner Stavros Dimas supported the ban on bluefin tuna fishing, as against Joe Borg's argument for 'balance' between scientific advice and industry interests (Vassallo 2009a). The European Greens believed that Borg was lobbying in favour of the tuna industry (Vassallo 2009b).

In 2009, the European Commission seemed to be on Dimas's side, as a compromise deal was reached through which bluefin tuna would be listed as an endangered species (The Times 2009a). The Commission went ahead with its proposal, and thus co-sponsored Monaco's proposal to have bluefin tuna within the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species (Cites). Malta's National Fishing Cooperative and the tuna ranching industry urged Malta's Government to oppose this proposal on the grounds that it would endanger Malta's 100 million Euro-per-year exports. Charlie Azzopardi from Azzopardi Fisheries said that 'this will be a deadly blow to an industry on which a lot of Maltese depend. It accounts for an injection of foreign currency into the economy and the deficit will surely be bigger without the industry' (Camilleri 2009a).

The majority of EU member states disagreed with the European Commission's proposals. Malta lobbied hard with other member states to vote against the Commission's position, and subsequently, Environment Commissioner Dimas said he regretted the decision, whilst Fisheries Commissioner Borg, toned down his original position and said that it was now up to ICCAT to be responsible for the recovery of the species (Camilleri 2009b).

Nature Trust and WWF expressed their disapproval of the vote. The Maltese ENGO said that 'short term economic gains were put before long term sustainable fishing and the welfare of this species' (The Times 2009b). Subsequently, and a few days before the ICCAT meeting, Din l-Art Helwa added its voice too, urging the Government of Malta to back Monaco's proposal for a ban in bluefin tuna trading till stocks recover, on the grounds of survival of the species and the long term survival of the fishing industry (The Times 2009c).

When ICCAT met in Brazil in November 2009, it was decided to have a 40 per cent reduction in tuna catches, from 22,000 to 13,500 tonnes in 2010, as well as stricter regulations such as the restriction of purse-seiners. Commissioner Joe Borg, the tuna industry in Malta and fishermen welcomed the decision, whilst the ENGOs and the European Greens opposed it (Camilleri 2009c). The European Council of Ministers decided to reduce Malta's quota to 161 tonnes for 2010, down from 331 tonnes in 2008 and 262 tonnes in 2009. Minister George Pullicino said that he was backing Italy's request for new financial measures with respect to the socio-economic impact of the decision (The Times 2009d).

4. Antagonisms and allegations of discrepancies and irregularities

The symbiotic relationship between tuna big-business and the state was also possibly being witnessed with regard to lack of effort by the Maltese state to combat alleged irregularities in bluefin tuna catches. *Malta Today* had already been querying whether a relationship of power exists in the tuna industry in Malta. Adding spice to such allegations, *Malta Today* reported that Charles Azzopardi, owner of Azzopardi Fisheries had invited Minister George Pullicino and MEPA chairman Andrew Calleja for a yachting trip to Sicily in April 2007 (*Malta Today* 2008b).

It was also being suggested that Malta's tuna export figures were showing discrepancies of over 6 million kg over what was being reported and estimates of how much tuna could actually be exported over a one year period (Vassallo 2008c). These allegations were being made by the international tuna consultancy firm Advanced Tuna Ranching Technologies, but were categorically denied by the Government of Malta through Fisheries director-general Anthony Gruppetta, who said that Malta was 'committed to fighting illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing activities' (*Malta Today* 2008c).

Malta Today, which was reporting on issues related to the tuna industry in general and Azzopardi Fisheries in particular, alleging irregular and illegal practices such as submission of false information on tuna catches (Vassallo 2008e) and infringement of development permits (Vassallo 2008f), was consequently faced with civil action for damages (libel) by seven tuna ranch and fish farm companies, including Azzopardi Fisheries. The newspaper responded that it would be summoning international experts from Greenpeace and Advanced Tuna Ranching Technologies amongst others as witnesses (*Malta Today* 2008d).

Subsequently, Alternattiva Demokratika – The Green Party wrote to Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg requesting him to investigate claims on false declarations by the Fisheries Ministry in Malta on two non-existent tuna farms and on the capacity of tuna farms in Malta. These allegations were categorically denied by the Ministry (Camilleri 2008d). In the meantime, WWF accused Italy of catching 38% more bluefin tuna than permitted, and of registering 800 tonnes of this excess in Maltese cages through Italian vessels. No investigations were carried out by the Maltese authorities in this regard, but the allegations were not denied by the Government (Vassallo 2008g). The bluefin tuna issue lingered on, with little satisfaction to those rallying around the nodal point which demanded a ban of bluefin tuna fishing till stocks recover.

5. Conclusion

From when the bluefin tuna issue was discursively articulated by ENGOs and the media, attempts were made to influence policy-makers for the regulation of unsustainable fishing, yet on the other hand it is more than clear that big business considerations were a tough overdetermining factor to overcome. The crisis-laden statements of ENGOs on collapse of tuna stocks, in response to what appeared to be a dislocatory situation, did not result in a hegemonic formation, and in terms of substantive impacts, were unsuccessful in banning the fishing of bluefin tuna until it become sustainable to recommence the activity. Even though the EU subscribes to conservationist environmental ideology in various environmental policy-making, in this specific case neo-liberal ideology had a prevailing overdetermining effect.

Both ICCAT and EU structures were characterised by a condensation of conflicts surrounding the issue at stake, yet both seem ultimately unwilling to endorse the demands of ENGOs for policy changes in this sector. To put things into context, there is

no such thing as a Birds Directive on bluefin tuna, neither in terms of legislation nor in terms of symbolic effect. What exists is a lobbying battlefield characterised by antagonistic discourses, yet hegemonically characterised by neo-liberal ideology and the interests of big-businesses and nation-states. The most that ENGOs have achieved through their chains of equivalence are nodal points which partially fixed meaning on the importance of sustainable fishing (Laclau, Mouffe 1985: 112; Howarth, Stravakakis 2000: 8). As things stand, therefore, the signifier which called for the banning of bluefin tuna fishing until stocks recovered was not hegemonic, neither within the EU in general nor within Malta in particular.

This case study featured the relative discursive silence of Maltese ENGOs, when compared to other environmental issues in Malta (Briguglio 2010; 2012). This is because they were not as vociferous on the bluefin tuna issue as they were on other matters. The conservationist ENGOs which spoke up on the matter (Nature Trust, Din l-Art Helwa, Bicref – the latter being the most focused on the issue) did not organise crusades. Instead, whether intentionally or not, they seemed to rely on the pressure of WWF and Greenpeace at European and global levels. When it mattered, the support of the EU and ICCAT left much to be desired, given that they only supported cuts in fishing rather than a ban until stocks recover. Hence, as far as the Maltese ENGOs were concerned, the EU was indirectly used as a gateway (Börzel 2008: 232; Johnston 2011: 186-7; Dimitrakopoulos, Richardson 2001: 344-5), yet results achieved were very modest.

The Nationalist and Labour parties, unlike the Greens, were supportive of the bluefin tuna industry, either directly, as was the case of the Nationalist Government (through its Ministry responsible for Fishing), or indirectly, as was the case with Labour's silence on the matter, save for its initial opposition to permits for development applications in 2002. There was no significant lobbying from the part of small-scale traditional fishermen against bluefin big business. The nodal point which combined neo-liberal ideology with the "national interest" prevailed.

Despite the failure of ENGOs to construct a hegemonic formation on the issue, and despite the fact that various claims were made on the alleged irregularities characterising bluefin tuna fishing, ENGOs are more empowered than was the case had there been no EU or ICCAT rules, even though they ultimately failed to reach their goals. This can be evaluated through the application of external impacts as proposed by Giugni (1995), van der Heijden (1999), Carter (2001) and Rootes (2007).

As regards sensitization, the issue did sensitize authorities and the public sphere, especially through the coverage in newspapers such as *Malta Today*. However, despite the dislocatory articulation of "collapsing fish stocks", and despite activism – especially of ENGOs at a European level and respective press coverage – there was no rallying point within the Maltese environmental movement. As stated above, street protests and public outcry were, missing, and institutions ultimately favoured big business interests.

As regards structural impacts, the lobbying of global ENGOs such as WWF and Greenpeace was witnessed, yet there were no significant changes in Malta's state structures, other than making sure that Malta had structural capability of conforming to EU and ICCAT prerequisites.

Malta's EU membership meant that as far as substantive impacts were concerned, Malta was bound to follow EU regulations, which, in turn, conformed to ICCAT agreements. Yet, within the EU, the position of member states (including Malta) was very influential – far more than that of ENGOs. Hence legislation on bluefin tuna fishing represented a mixed bag, as it imposed limits on bluefin tuna fishing which, however,

were miles away from the demands of ENGOs. Besides, questions have been raised on the actual enforcement of legislation – even in its minimalist form – on bluefin tuna catches.

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