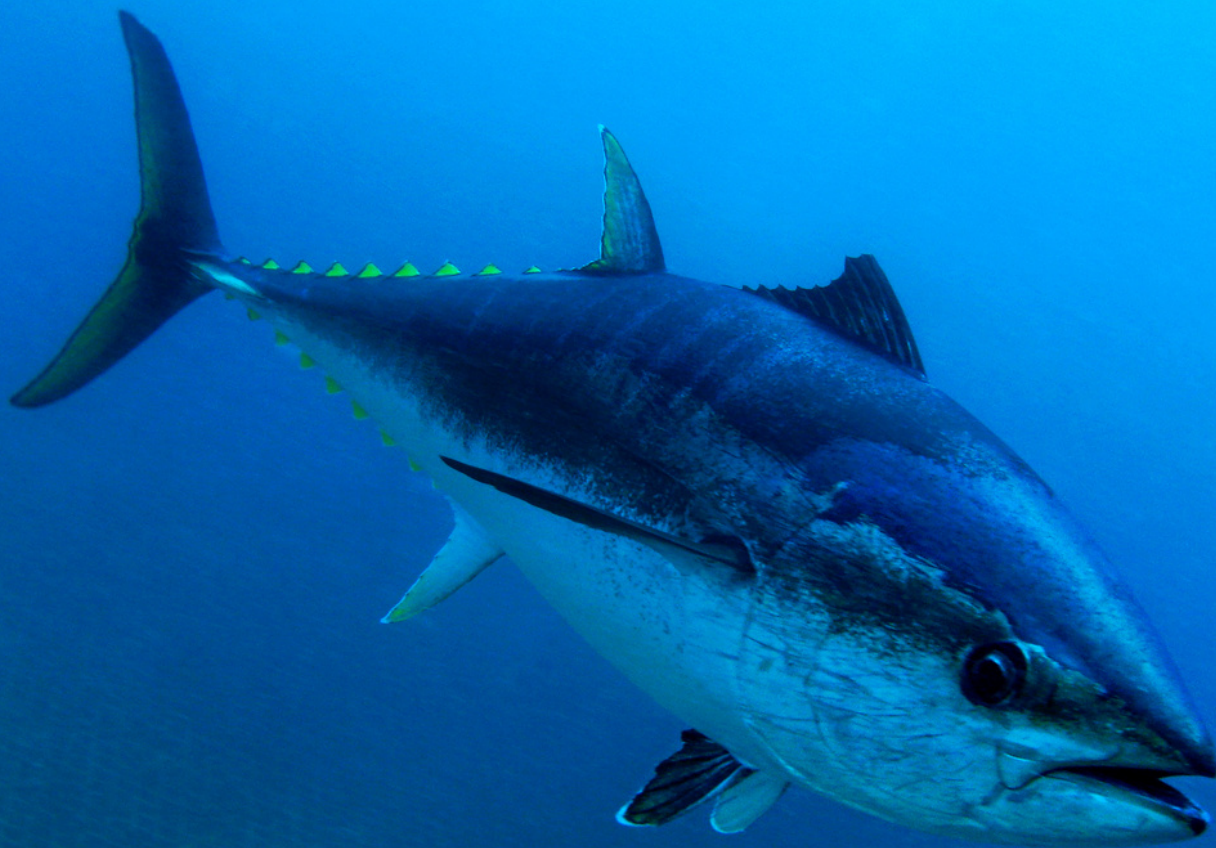


Appendix 3

Tuna en Masse: Necrograms and Representations of the Living Dead

Jennifer Telesca



July 2021

“Chronicles of Death in Popular American Narratives about Tunas”

Executive Summary

This report considers dominant narratives in American popular culture that treat tunas as devoid of sentience, cognition, and agency. Representations across various cultural registers regard tunas solely as objects for sport, recreation, and entertainment and as either fashionable cuisine (sushi) or everyday (canned) foodstuff. Across narratives about bluefin, yellowfin, and albacore tunas, at least in the United States, an unmistakable pattern repeats: tunas appear at or near death, en masse, grouped by population, depersonalized, disposable, unnamed, as if passively awaiting human consumption. In the popular imagination tunas are not individual agents worthy of care. By contrast, other sea creatures (such as cetaceans and octopuses) emerge not only in the world but as beings who are aware of it. Throughout representations of tunas, modern attachments to Whiteness, status, masculinity, sexuality, nationalism, and imperial ambitions play themselves out under racial, colonial capitalism. Political economy and the performance of identity through food and leisure help to explain, in part, why death narratives about tunas are human-centric, terra-centric, and market driven. This report is my effort to track the persistence of anthropocentrism in cultural narratives that mark tunas for erasure and early death.

Outline of Report

Section I clarifies how I know what I know. Statements on theory and method provide background on the analysis that follows. Section II examines the category tuna. It considers general patterns in the representation of tunas as a staple and premium food and as playthings for

sport, recreation, and entertainment among the leisure class. Section III (bluefins), Section IV (yellowfins), and Section V (albacores) are intentionally sequenced to reflect the cultural fact that on closer inspection there is a pecking order within the category tuna. Prized bluefins appear more frequently in cultural narratives in comparison to yellowfins and albacores. Even so, moral panics about tunas cluster in three discreet areas—the fear of overexploitation (bluefins), the fear of bycatch (yellowfins), and the fear of toxicity (albacores)—despite the fact that to varying degree these phenomena inhabit the life worlds of each of these tunas based on the ways people have interacted with them since at least the early twentieth century. Section V considers exceptions to the rule of death. Although children’s books, animated film, and advertisements offer some space to imagine the inner and social worlds of tunas, these representations anthropomorphize tunas to such an extent that tunas appear more human than fish. Simply, audiences learn no more about the life world of a tuna after—than before—a momentary encounter with an illustrated or animated text, even when a tuna is named and personalized.

Section I: Theory and Method

This report documents the practice of representation as it relates to tunas in America. It is not a story about the way fishers, regulators, scientists, wholesalers, canners, consumers, and other actors experience or interact with this kind of fish. Likewise, what follows is a summary of the patterns that classify and rank, organize and convey meaning about tunas in the popular imagination. People of the same culture tend to share similar conceptual maps based on image-texts that are encoded and constructed, but these conceptual maps are not rigid and fixed. Meaning is produced through a system of representation, and changes over time (Hall 1997).

This is important: the death narrative about tunas is a pattern so widespread, omnipresent, and available that I have not detected a protracted, meaningful modification to this representation since the early twentieth century when reportage about the human-tuna relationship began in earnest.

Research by Brooks team member Becca Franks confirms that within the scientific literature there is little or no attention paid to whether tunas can think, feel, mourn, and carry on a social life. There are various reasons for this. Fisheries experts might internalize the worldview of tunas as “stocks” (Telesca 2017) or they might find it difficult to carry out studies outside of this frame because funding might be limited, granting agencies uninterested, and labs hard to establish in aquariums and the pelagic sea. It’s worth acknowledging that in the world of studying fish behavior, as the ethologist Jonathan Balcombe claims, the scientific establishment leans conservative (2016: 53). Even so, it remains an open question as to whether scientific discoveries (and law) shape cultural narratives, or if cultural narratives shape what become scientific discoveries (and law). I see them as co-constructed, their meaning derived from concrete historical situations, always entangled in and subject to the way people negotiate identities, social relationships, and the demands of the day’s political economy. I do not want to privilege science (and law) as blunt instruments or as ways of knowing at the expense of Indigenous and spiritual worldviews, which might be sources of transformation too.

Any study of representation must attend not only to gathering image-texts. It must also track and remain alert to the distribution of those image-texts in the public sphere. How many views did a video have online? Did viewers leave comments? If so, what did viewers say? What are the audience estimates for a given publication? Is there a paywall to view a documentary

film? Which venues screened or made available a documentary film? These questions help to assess the targeted audience for and the uptake, reach, and authority of cultural narratives.

Answers to them are proxies for how shared, widespread, and familiar a cultural narrative is.

In light of the need to systematically amass widely distributed representations of tunas in America—as a safeguard against anecdotal evidence and my own prior assumptions—I consulted search engines (using “view count” when available) on the websites of YouTube, TED, IMBD (for feature and documentary films), and the *New York Times*. Regarding the last, I searched the *New York Times* directly. It archives its news stories since its inception in 1851. This allowed me to remain alert to change in frequency and kind of story. To ensure algorithms captured a wide variety of popular representations, in consultation with Pratt librarians, I also searched databases available through Pratt Library, including ProQuest, JSTOR, and DAAI. The spreadsheets I have assembled offer a snapshot of common representations of tunas in the United States. Most entries in the spreadsheets detail coverage in the *New York Times*, which allowed me to chart historical events and compare coverage of tuna types over time.

My choice of the *New York Times* is intentional. Regarded as the newspaper of record in the United States, the *New York Times* is what media scholars call an “agenda setter”: its stories ripple across and appear in other venues in print, online, and over broadcast television, nationally and internationally, in ways that influence and order the priorities of bourgeois readers who hold at least some political power (see Telesca 2020). Even so, gone are the days of decades past when mainstream media commanded the attention of most audiences. The public sphere today is not only multiple (Fraser 1990). It is fragmented, so much so that mainstream venues such as the *New York Times* no longer enjoy the status of primary gatekeeper. Which news outlets people

consult, which films they watch, how they watch them, whether they subscribe to YouTube channels, whether they are active on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media platforms—these modes of engagement demonstrate how noisy the media ecosystem has become. Disenchantment with conventional media is prevalent.

Despite today's patchy and uneven media environment, patterns in who is the primary addressee of cultural narratives about tunas remain. I have found that, more often than not, representations are directed at the consumer as representative of the bourgeoisie: the recreational fisher with enough disposable income to purchase boats, fuel, and tackle;¹ the discerning housewife looking for affordable, healthy meals;² and, increasingly since the 1980s, the connoisseur savoring tunas in recipes and restaurant reviews. To use the *New York Times* own headline, "Following the Trail of the Yuppie."³ Even the canned albacore by the 1990s is celebrated as gourmet for elites (evident in such headlines as "Say Goodbye to Tuna Casserole," "Albacore Steaks with Simmered Fennel," and "Salade Niçoise with Yogurt Vinaigrette"). Individual consumers with purchasing power are asked, "Time to Boycott Tuna Again?," so read the headline from September 2011 by the former *New York Times* columnist Mark Bittman.

Readers of the "Style" and "Home and Garden" sections of the *New York Times* are far removed from the lifeworld of tunas. A search of articles in *Vogue*, the monthly fashion and lifestyle magazine, shows the same: tunas are a cuisine or prop when chronicling, say, a destination wedding in Sicily. Even so, the panic about tuna toxicity did appear in *Vogue* once in

¹ See the section "Sports," formerly "Wood, Field and Stream."

² See, for example, the headline "Food: Inexpensive Fish" in August 1961, which appeared in the "Food, Fashion, Family, Furnishing" section, now "Style."

³ This was a headline in the *New York Times* "Dining Out" section for New Jersey from November 1986.

2009, a subject I'll discuss below. Suffice it to say here that these stories are preoccupied with the deleterious impact on the health of the people who eat polluted tunas, not on how contaminants might impact the welfare of tunas as living beings.

These examples show that, by contrast, citizens making collective demands on their government tend not to be the primary audience of these narratives. It is worth considering if the representations of tunas post 1970—which in the main target individual consumers—dovetail with the mainstream media's retreat from the concerns of the working class in the neoliberal era, as other scholars have documented (Martin 2019). In the United States, the private sector has come to dominate the media landscape. The effort to push product for advertisers dilutes the quality, if not suppresses the delivery, of information to citizens who, in principle, hold influential players accountable for the decisions made on their behalf in a democratic system. In short, political economy shapes, but does not determine, what becomes the content of a cultural narrative (McChesney 2008, Benson and Powers 2011).

Section II: The Category Tuna

If cultural narratives are not about how smart, feeling, perceptive, social, aware, stressed, joyous, industrious, and parental tunas are, then what are these narratives about? I've found them human-centric, terra-centric, and market driven. Representations reproduce the idea that tunas are just another product for sale, as if a machine running on instinct, indifferent, conquerable in the fight of "man-the-hunter," a being utterly stripped of her inner and social life.

Across modes of representation in popular culture, the same images-texts repeat and thus are predictable. Tunas appear near or at capture, if not already dead. Some are lynched and hung

by the tail on a noose at marinas. Others are shown chopped up, gutted, seared, canned in marketplaces, restaurants, and home kitchens. Tunas are usually pictured en masse, like fine-tuned machines, their bodies grouped by population, their lives submissive casualties in the victory of “man-the-hunter.” Tunas do not emerge in the popular imagination as one-of-a-kind individuals, named, with personality, worthy of care. Discourse instead relegates the lives of tunas to another product for sale, resembling disposable merchandise on an assembly line, as if they are goods swimming aimlessly in the ocean who passively await and are indifferent to their capture. In the popular imagination, no matter the variety, tunas appear as things meant to be killed for human consumption. In a word, anthropocentrism.

And killed they are. The slaughter of tunas accelerated in the twentieth century, especially after World War II, when rich countries sent their petroleum-powered, subsidized fleets to catch them in all corners of the globe. According to the latest biannual report issued in 2020 by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, “Catches of tunas continued to increase, reaching their highest levels in 2018 at about 7.9 million tonnes.” Skipjacks and yellowfins accounted for about 58 percent of these catches.⁴ Industrial extraction drags on, undeterred, even in the face of growing public awareness about the excessive capture of wild fishes, which poses a threat to biodiversity in an unprecedented period of human-induced climate disruption. The specter of “managed extinction” (Telesca 2020) has been with us in image for a very long time, if only we took the time to look.

⁴ See <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229en/ca9229en.pdf>

In the *New York Times* bestselling book, *What a Fish Knows: The Inner Lives of Our Underwater Cousins*, Balcombe (2016) writes of fish broadly: “According to FishBase—the largest and most often consulted online database on fishes—33,249 species, in 564 families and 64 orders, have been described as of January 2016. That’s more than the combined total of all mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians. When we refer to ‘fish’ we are referring to 60 percent of all the known species on Earth with backbones” (11). Tunas abstracted and reduced to a population or generalizable class of being is thus not unique to fishes or to this kind of fish in particular (cetaceans and octopuses experience this too, as do creatures on land). We might consider this an expression of the modern condition in a market economy, or how alienated people have become from the life worlds of sea creatures (and plants and other nonhuman animals), so marginalized and disappeared they have become from people’s everyday lives.

Despite the pervasiveness of tuna death narratives, we still might ask: has this representation shifted at all, even if at the margins? Although tunas are not at all the subject of the newly released documentary films, *Seaspiracy* (2021) and *The Dark Hobby* (2021), about the dangers of overfishing and the aquarium trade, respectively, Balcombe appears in both films to shed light on the inner lives of fishes. This is a significant moment in the representation of fish agency, sentience, and cognition. However, I cannot say that these contributions, important as they are, mark a meaningful shift in the cultural narratives about tunas per se. Even Balcombe’s book only references a tuna’s agency, sentience, and cognition once, compared to hundreds of anecdotes and studies about other fishes. The book’s discussion of whether bluefins can think is

treated as conjecture.⁵ Given the popularity of other documentary films about overfishing (*The End of the Line* (2009)), master sushi chefs (*Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011)), and extinction (*Racing Extinction* (2015)), all of which mention at least bluefins, a question worth asking is: why are audiences—and the producers who generate narratives for them—ready to hear this story about the cognition, sentience, and agency of fishes *now*? In other words, what are the historical conditions that enable *this*—and not another—narrative to mature in popular culture?

Curiosity about the life worlds of tunas, or any fish, is very different from general knowledge about them. In my experience, people unfamiliar with the sea do not know that a single adult tuna cannot fit inside a tin can, like an anchovy. (No one would mistake an adult whale or shark for being tiny.) Perhaps the most famous incident that captures people's inexperience with, and naivete about, tunas came in 2003 with a gaffe by Jessica Simpson, the singer, actress, fashion designer, and reality TV star. In the debut episode of MTV's *Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica*, the pop star confused chicken for tuna when lying on her couch at home, eating tuna salad:

“Is this chicken that I have, or is this fish?” she asks her then new (but now former) husband. “I know it's tuna, but it says chicken by the sea,” she continued. “Is that stupid? What is it called — chicken by the sea or in the sea?”

Nick (Lachey) looked at his then-bride with confusion. “Chicken of the Sea is the brand,” he said. “You know, 'cause a lot of people eat tuna, just like a lot of people eat chicken. Chicken of the Sea.”

⁵ Balcombe (2016) writes: “Southern bluefin tunas in the waters of Australia spend hours rolling on their sides, catching the sun's rays. It's not known for sure why they do this... I expect the warmth of the sun also feels good to a tuna, for pleasure evolved to reward useful behaviors” (66).

“Oh....” Simpson replied. “Oh, I understand now. I read it wrong.”

From *People* magazine at checkouts in grocery stores to *The Today Show* on morning broadcast television, coverage of the incident went viral, and has appeared in pop culture intermittently since. It fit prior assumptions about “dumb American blondes” whose road to fame stemmed from beauty, not intelligence. So legendary was the incident that, in June 2021, after investigators from the *New York Times* tested the DNA of tunas sold by the sandwich chain Subway—and found “no amplifiable tuna DNA” present—Simpson took to Twitter to tell her 6.2 million followers: “It’s OK @SUBWAY. It IS confusing.”⁶ Celebrity reinforced how terra-centric the lens through which to view a tuna is, as if the abundance of wild tunas at sea mimics the mass production of chickens in factories on land. The incident also demonstrated the overwhelming absence of coverage about who the fishes are that become tuna melts.

Tunas as Staple Foodstuff: The Making of a Canned Meat

Perhaps Simpson can be excused for mistaking tuna for chicken. The industry has long marketed tunas as chickens to push its product as common fare. (The brand Chicken of the Sea is the most obvious example.) The story of the rise of canned tuna as a staple foodstuff relied on advertisers who convinced everyday Americans that tunas tasted—and looked—just like chicken. That is, the best canned tuna is white.

⁶ The mislabeling of fish at market and in restaurants is an ongoing problem. A recent study in the *Guardian* documented fraud, which echoes previous ones conducted by such groups as Oceana over the years: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/mar/15/revealed-seafood-happening-on-a-vast-global-scale>

To satiate the American preference for white chicken, white eggs, white dairy, including milk and cheese, the choice cut for canned tuna has long been white too (Freeman 2013, Stănescu 2018). The racialized dimensions of food culture cannot be overlooked. The production, promotion, distribution, and consumption of canned tuna as white shaped and gave rise to industrial manufacture from day one, when the commercial canning of albacores began in 1903 (Smith 2012: 23).

The brief history that follows provides the context for understanding the claims I make later in this report about why death narratives about tunas are so deeply entrenched and stubbornly the same in a culture rooted in anthropocentrism. It sheds light on the importance of food and leisure for performing one's identity and participating in social life, especially when situated in a market economy that has produced America's consumer culture.

In December 1893, the California Fish Company based in San Pedro began to can sardines and mackerel. By 1903, it attempted to diversify its portfolio through rock cod and halibut but sales of them were unsuccessful and the products discontinued. At first, trade in canned tuna was anemic. The author of *American Tuna: The Rise and Fall of an Improbable Food* (2012), Andrew F. Smith writes: "The canned tuna was just too oily, strong tasting, and it was an off-putting dark brown color" (30). Rather than dismiss tunas entirely, the young canner Wilbur Wood from Portland, Oregon gave albacore a try, even though albacores were not classified as tunas then. Albacore's selling point: a third of the fish is "white meat" (Bitting quoted in Smith 2012: 30).

The purity, freshness, and cleanliness associated with white food products spoke to housewives with purchasing power in America who, as overseers of menus and masters of the

domestic realm, avidly read *Good Housekeeping* magazine. In 1907, an advertisement there for “Tunny Fish”—then a novelty—by the Frank E. Davis Fish Company in Gloucester, Massachusetts claimed its product was “entirely free from bones and skin, packed in fine olive oil. The flavor slightly resembles the white meat of chicken and it also resembles chicken in appearance” (*Good Housekeeping* quoted in Smith 2012: 33). Sales in Vermont and Massachusetts convinced executives of the California Fish Company that, by 1908, its tuna product line could attract American consumers after all. Marketing makeovers were underway (Smith 2012: 33).

The classification of fish as (not) meat in the popular imagination is ongoing, far from settled, characteristic of different cultural orderings associated with organized religion and lifestyle choice. Catholics who practice their faith by abstaining from land-based meat on Fridays during the Lenten fast—or pescatarians who eat fish but not beef, pork, and chicken—briefly illustrate the point. As recently as October 2016, a headline from the “Health” section of the *New York Times* asked: “Why Is Fish Good for You? Because It Replaces Meat?” Decades of marketing have not yet convinced all American publics that fish is an alternative to land-based meat.

Following the classic text by Carol Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory* (2015 [1990]), we might consider the contestation over fish-meat as representative of broader preoccupations with virility, male dominance, and privileged masculinities in the United States, especially now in this #metoo moment. The alleged superiority of meat-based, high-protein diets indexed the prestige associated with male power, patterned elsewhere across the globe in stratified societies and experienced in the United States

too. Over time, for at least some Americans, tuna-as-meat appeared sensible, ordinary, and routine in a century that also produced America as superpower, its status as the world's largest military now precarious and under perceived threat from the East, even in the face of its forever wars.

Race, class, and sex together upheld meat as a power food. They mapped onto marketing ploys by suppliers looking to create consumer demand for new tuna products. Identity also spoke to matters of production and to who labored when manufacturing tunas as a quasi-meat. Anxiety about immigration—as a threat to White power—fueled the racist “yellow peril” promoted most viciously by William Randolph Hearst and his media empire. He grafted a disturbing orientalism onto stories told about tunas. This representation repeats to this day, as we see below.

The power of the US tuna industry would not have been possible without the immigrants who knew how to catch albacores, based on their experience in their home countries, especially those from Japan. Smith (2012) writes of their labor: “In 1920, only 488,180 pounds of albacore were caught by ‘white fishermen,’ while Japanese hauled in more than 12 million pounds, or 89 percent of the total catch” (53, quotes in original). By 1920, 65 percent of tuna fishers were of Japanese descent (Smith 2012: 57). The slender bamboo rods used to catch albacores were known colloquially as “Jap poles.” The power of Japanese laborers in the fisheries sector instilled fear in a xenophobic country at a time of world wars, including whether fishers were more loyal to Japan than to the United States. The first Japanese internment camp opened in Manzanar, California in 1942.

Smith credits sport fishers (2012: 8)—white, rich, and male—battling tunas by rod and reel near Catalina Island with shifting America's eating habits, even though then few anglers ate

the fishes they caught. Aided by railroads, which made formerly remote areas accessible to people, saltwater fishers popularized their sport in America based on what had been an upper-class British tradition during colonial times. Distinct from subsistence and commercial fishing, their “gentlemanly practices [were] designed to pit the fisherman’s skill against a cunning fish,” writes Smith (2012: 13). But propertied men did more than escape their everyday by heading to the country to outwit a clever fish. A few, including Wilbur Wood and Frank Van Camp, had the money to invest in canneries. They helped to transform “trash fish” into a lucrative commodity. The port of San Diego became their hub. Throughout the twentieth century, the tuna industry on the US West Coast grew to wield tremendous power in local, state, national, and international politics, evident in the various headlines from the *New York Times* about tuna wars, tuna embargos, and tuna fishing disputes.

By 1917, when the United States entered World War I, canned tuna had become so common it was used in rations. In the same year, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) defined albacore (and skipjack) as tuna, but excluded bonito, mackerel, and yellowtail (Smith 2012: 40).⁷ Also in this year the catch of albacores nose-dived by three-fourths. Industry searched for product replacements. Its fishers headed south to Mexican waters. They found skipjacks and yellowfins. “The bad news,” Smith writes, “was that the white meat of the skipjack and yellowfin was just not as white as the meat of the albacore” (2012: 40). The preoccupation with Whiteness continued.

⁷ It was not until 1983 that ichthyologists Bruce B. Collette and Cornelia E. Nauen assigned albacores to the genus *Thunnus*.

But consumers were already hooked on tuna, so producers rebranded canned varieties with names like “fancy tuna” and “light tuna.” Skipjacks and yellowfins were cheaper, so much so that their sale replaced albacores as the primary canned tuna meat. Bargain prices for canned tuna during the Great Depression enabled the industry’s profits to surge. By World War II, when beef was again rationed, tuna occupied a central place in the American diet. Even after the war was over, sales continued to rise. By the middle of the twentieth century, tuna purchases topped those of salmon to become America’s most popular fish food (Smith 2012: 75).

But times—and markets—have changed. According to the National Fisheries Institute, a trade group representing the seafood industry in the United States, the most popular seafood consumed by Americans today is shrimp, followed by salmon, the bulk of which are farmed and sourced abroad. Canned tuna now ranks third.⁸ However, for much of the twentieth century, tunas were the most popular seafood in the American diet until displaced by shrimp in 2001 (Smith 2012: 171). The three major canned tuna brands sold in the United States—Chicken of the Sea, Bumble Bee, and Sunkist—are now foreign owned. They control about 80 percent of the canned tuna market sold in the United States (Smith 2012: 165). Their market share has remained steady since the 1950s when the industry consolidated.

For the discriminating consumer, the *New York Times* offered an appraisal of various canned tuna brands in its lead story from “The Living Section” section under the headline, “Canned Tuna: In Search of Flavor and Texture” in August 1997. A typical image of stacked cans one atop the other reminded readers that tunas were mere commodities, mass-produced and

⁸ See the report by Intrafish dated 24 February 2020 at <https://www.intrafish.com/markets/here-are-americas-most-consumed-seafood-species/2-1-760884>

meant for human consumption. These tunas might have been long dead, but their shelf life was assured. The anthropocentrism that inhabits the representation of tunas is reinforced by the accompanying headline, seemingly unrelated, in the *New York Times*: “Safari Skills: How to Get Elephants Drunk.” The dispatch from Johannesburg opened with these lines: “Many tourists won’t admit it, but what they really want to see on an African safari isn’t just elephants or lions. It’s a kill.”

Tuna as Haute Cuisine: Sushi Goes Global

Posh restaurants such as Delmonico’s in New York longed served tunas as haute cuisine for its patrons already familiar with them through travels to Europe. But for the vast majority of Americans, tunas—whether albacores, yellowfins, or bluefins—once came canned. The advent of the global sushi economy changed that. The seafood industry transformed tremendously in the 1970s (Issenberg 2007). Investment in the technology to move chilled, absolutely fresh fish fast overnight by air, from one side of the planet to the other, allowed the bluefin to emerge as the “glamour fish” (Telesca 2020). Consumption of bluefin by the leisure class is a relatively recent invention post World War II. It is not a culinary tradition since time immemorial.

Consumption of bluefin was a way for elites in America to perform their culinary know-how, because in the homeland of sushi—Japan—bluefins were prized most for their fatty, red flesh. In January 2019, one bluefin from the Pacific weighing 613 pounds (278 kilos) sold at auction for a record USD\$3.1 million in Tokyo. Although the price of bluefins is not as elevated the rest of the trading year, the story about bluefin as a luxury good reinforced through popular

images of Tsukiji marketplace—where bluefins appear lined up in rows of chalky tombstones in a frigid, indoor cemetery—that, alas, these tunas are meant to be killed.

In 1980, *Gourmet* magazine wrote about tuna steaks, just when *Shogun*, a mini-series based on the James Clavell novel, aired on NBC so that viewers might imagine the fear of an English navigator shipwrecked and held captive by samurai warriors in Japan. The restaurant chain Ruby Tuesday introduced everyday Americans to tuna steaks grilled over mesquite in 1986 (Smith 2012: 96). A small, thick cut of pink or red tuna resembled filet mignon, and could be eaten without guilt by the heart conscience, or so it once seemed to those who could afford it. Tuna steaks were customarily cooked rare, and could be easily cooked at home. Sushi bars and Japanese restaurants opened with chefs emerging from kitchens to prepare meals in front of spectators on restaurant floors. The sushi and Japanese steakhouse, Benihana, opened in New York in 1964, but it wasn't until 1982 that the company went public, traded its stock, and expanded its brand to include frozen food. Benihana, said its motto, was not just a meal but an experience. Food—and the performance of simplistic Japanese culture—became its own form of entertainment in America. It bears all the hallmarks of orientalism.

It is here that one of the most widely distributed images of dead tunas must be unpacked. As of this writing, the most popular YouTube video about tunas appeared in July 2017. Posted by Aden Films, which has nearly 2 million subscribers, the short film is titled *Fish Cutting in Sicily: Tuna and Swordfish*. Over the course of nine minutes, we see an everyday scene at an open market in Catania, Sicily: a fisher confidently cuts by massive cleaver a deadened chunk of bluefin, with swordfish to his side, in a dexterous display of masculinity in a society, like Japan, known culturally for protecting honor. It's "red gold" on the cheap, sold for a measly five euros.

The rustic outdoor scene feels like a throwback from the past, or, said one commentator, “the way mankind lived for thousands of years.” The operation to cut open a fish after capture is necessary to transform the animal into meat, whether eaten raw or cooked. Part of the viewers’ fascination stems from the way the Sicilian with his thick belly, Adidas track pants, Fila tee, and cigarette ablaze performs for us something primitive in the hunt for the animal, even though the power over a dead bluefin is already absolute. Said one commentor: “That blade looks something like I’d see in dark souls.” To date, this one comment has received 519 likes, no dislikes, and 30 responses.

As of this writing, the video has garnered an astounding 86 million views and has registered over six thousand comments. Some viewers express culinary or resource nationalism. Others voiced nostalgia for “normality,” a time pre-Covid when people could go to the market unmasked and eat fresh fishes within hours of catch. A comment by a viewer named “Ubiquity” read: “You mean this is the same tuna we get in tiny cans? How do they make it fit?” Based on the responses, the comment didn’t appear to be a joke. Common knowledge about the life worlds of tunas is very thin.

Similar videos on YouTube appear in the dozens, some with millions of views each. Most offer tutorials for how to slice such prime tuna meat as bluefin and bigeye. Many of them are based in Japan and feature chefs in authentic dress, in kimonos or yukatas, as if the popular documentary film *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011) has gone the way of reality TV.

The image of already dead tunas—as beings who appear meant to be killed—demonstrates power over the living in what the postcolonial theorist Achille Mbembe calls a “zero world” (2019: 167-170). Time feels suspended, endings are deferred, the slaughter goes

on, tunas reappear, albeit smaller in size and number. The compulsion to organize and repeat these images has become a precondition for extracting a tuna's value as mere food and entertainment. The image of death is so redundant that it renders mute the possibility to even think a tuna's agency, sentience, and cognition. One of the only constituencies that might defy the trend is the recreational fisher, who acknowledges through sport how smart tunas are in the angler's quest to capture them.

Tunas for Sport and Recreation

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, catalyst for his Nobel Prize for Literature, Ernest Hemingway's novella, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1951) emerged just when the industrial catch of high-seas fish the world over accelerated. Taught in countless classrooms across America, regarded as one of the finest achievements in American literature, the book exposes readers to sea creatures through the eyes of Santiago, an octogenarian Spaniard from the Canary Islands who lived in Cuba for decades. His fight with an eighteen-foot marlin, measured tip to tail, bitten to pieces by circling sharks, is the stuff of legend. Santiago caught and ate tunas—albacores and bonitos—to survive his long journey back home from sea. Santiago famously calls the marlin his “brother,” a being he venerates so much that he cannot bring himself to eat the fish he caught.

But catching fish for subsistence is not the same as catching fish for sport and entertainment. The proximity to and experience with game fishes has allowed recreational anglers to become attuned to the plight of sea creatures. Some are active in the conservation movement—because they can be. They fish for leisure, not for livelihood.

Remarkable that in 1907 the *New York Times* ran this extended headline, which references how concerned sport clubs were about excessive catch, destructive gear, and toxicity over one-hundred years ago: “ANGLING CLUBS TO MEET HERE; Scientific Fishermen of the United States Seek a Closer Union. SCARCITY OF THE GAME FISH Causes Ascribed to Overfishing, Use of Nets, and Pollution of Waters -- Prominent Clubmen” (emphasis in original). To this day, some coverage about marine conservation in the *New York Times* appears in the section dedicated to sport.

Even so, there can be no sport if there are no fishes. And the hunt must have rules for the sport to have integrity—not too heavy a tackle, not too small a length—otherwise, the hunt for the biggest of gamefishes is no longer a matter of chance and skill but of mechanical slaughter and butchery (see Marvin 1988). The first sportfishing association dedicated to fresh *and* saltwater fishes in the United States formed on Catalina Island in California in 1898. Boasting such members as US General George S. Patton, and in an honorary capacity US Presidents Grover Cleveland and Theodore Roosevelt, The Tuna Club, said its bylaws, was “a gentlemen’s club [formed] to prevent the slaughter of game-fish with hand-lines [and] to elevate the standard of sport on the Pacific Coast” (Holder 1910: 78-79). In other words, angling for sport was reserved as a leisure pastime for white, propertied men.

Although I want to imagine recreational fishers as regular advocates for our tuna kin, they are stuck with the thorny problem of whether fish feel pain (Braithwaite 2010; Vettese, Franks, and Jacquet 2020), including in their tag and release practices. Acknowledging how clever a tuna might be is not equivalent to conferring a tuna agency. To grant a tuna intelligence—but not the capacity to suffer—might in the end exaggerate the brawn of a wild

adversary and show how difficult the fight and how grand the victory over another living being were. Furthermore, discourse about fish behavior is linked to the advantage this knowledge bestows anglers in the hunt: where fishes travel, what they're biting, if the full moon at certain times of year will impact whether they'll bite at all. In short, a tuna's agency, sentience, and cognition are fraught for this public too.

Recreational fishing is big business. The boats, the outboard engines, the gear, the tackle, the marinas, the docking fees, the lodging, the transportation totaled \$46 billion in 2013, said the American Sportfishing Association. According to the US Fish and Wildlife Services in 2011, over 33 million people over the age of sixteen participate in recreational fishing, making it one of the nation's most popular outdoor activities (Balcombe 2016: 224-225). Dozens of sportfishing magazines, cable television shows, and YouTube channels cater to all sorts of demographics. In some of them, tanned young "girls" with long tresses sexed up in string bikinis work a rod and reel under the hot sun, as if another kind of trophy, at least for the women who see themselves this way and for the white heteronormative men who have the money to chase these kinds of thrills.⁹ Whether young or old in retirement, they're easy targets for marketers representing pharmaceutical, travel-related, financial service, and real estate companies. Their commercials picture outdoor scenes even though these industries have nothing to do with fishing, let alone with tunas.

The issue used by www.magazines.com to attract subscribers to the popular *SaltWater Sportsman* embodies the sentiment on its cover: an albacore at the point of capture, near death,

⁹ In July 2021, the YouTube video "Bikini Girls, Catch Huge Yellowfin Tuna, Overnighter" by Nicole Spenc, who has 178,000 subscribers, has been viewed almost 220,000 times.

takes a lure with an angler ready to boat the fish at the sea surface. The accompanying text reads: “small reels and big power,” “big striper breakthrough: hot tactics with eels,” and “low-down on down riggers: your best setup”.¹⁰ When hypermasculinity is celebrated and sold to anglers interpolated into believing the power derived from it, the inner and social lives of tunas—registered culturally as soft and emotional—are rendered insignificant, if not threatening to the status quo.

Section III: Bluefins and the Panic of Overexploitation

Members of another angling community—the one fishing for livelihood—take the leading role in the highly-rated television series, *Wicked Tuna*, which first aired on the National Geographic channel in 2012. Its promotional copy reads:

Wicked Tuna follows a group of salty fishermen from the nation's oldest seaport, Gloucester, Massachusetts, as they make their living the way it's been done for centuries—rod and reel fishing, one catch at a time—all in pursuit of the bluefin tuna. One ‘monstah’ bluefin can be worth more than \$20,000, and with that kind of money on the line, every captain is fighting to be the best in the fleet.

The “salty” fishers chasing “monstahs” indicate who this series is for: not the well-bred angler adventuring on weekends but the working-class laborer who physically toils to make a living in a storied New England town, clinging to traditions past, as if catching bluefin tuna by rod and reel

¹⁰ See https://www.magazines.com/salt-water-sportsman-magazine.html?utm_id=538%7CGoogle%7Cc%7C1533759019%7C60205331244%7C291176225426&utm_source=google&utm_medium=cpc&utm_campaign=MDC_NMT_GSSP&gclid=Cj0KCQjwiqWHBhD2ARIsAPCDzak-Pn-PqwpoqmsaAFQOtSWpgvx646-Uq693OkQr8DrPoJsTuL2uvX8aApc_EALw_wcB

was a timeless practice anyway.¹¹ The jacket for *Wicked Tuna* tells us that these anglers are overwhelmingly white too.

Modeled after the reality TV show, *Deadliest Catch*, which follows crab fishers in Alaska, *Wicked Tuna* also exploits the hypermasculinity associated with angling but does so with a twist. Says Wikipedia: “The teams of fishermen battle each other to see who can get the most profit out of catching the fish.” There is violence here, not only perpetrated on the animal but expressed toward each other, as if combat through competition is hard-wired, naturally, into what it means to be a man. This disposition is applauded in a society that lets brute capitalism reign. The message must resonate: the program is now in its tenth season, has enjoyed two spin-offs (*Wicked Tuna: North-South* and *Wicked Tuna: Outer Banks*), and exploits opportunities for merchandising—clothing, art, and gear—for the people who promote the brand, if not the stereotype of the lumpen proletariat turned struggling entrepreneur.

To be clear, this is entertainment, not education about marine life or a space where solidarity with working people is forged.¹² The Walt Disney Company owns the magazine and the TV channel, National Geographic, which hosts *Wicked Tuna*. Here again, the bluefin appears as a being meant to be killed. She’s sacrificed for the white working class to survive. In a quaint

¹¹ Fishers in the North Atlantic once thought a bluefin a nuisance because she shredded the nets used to target herring and other commercial fish. Rod and reel fishing for bluefin on the high seas was hardly a centuries-old tradition passed down through generations. Although the promotional text for *Wicked Tuna* is exaggerated, it nonetheless stokes feelings of nostalgia for some viewers looking to “Make America Great Again.”

¹² The “fan culture” website, *Looper*, published a story about the “Untold Truth of Wicked Tuna” in July 2018. The reality for cast members behind the scenes is tragic: one died prematurely in his late twenties of a cause not made public, another succumbed to drug addiction, another was charged with assaulting a woman while vacationing in North Carolina. See <https://www.looper.com/129555/the-untold-truth-of-wicked-tuna/>

coastal town in the heart of colonial America, fishers—and the way of life they represent—are disappearing as much as the big bluefins are. But the romance can still be had, say some writers, if this form of “artisanal” fishing is preserved.¹³ This is a world far removed from promoting the inner lives of bluefin tunas who take as their social unit the shoal. It would destabilize the brand, if *Wicked Tuna* did.

“National Geographic's New TV Show ‘Wicked Tuna’ Trivializes Plight of Disappearing Bluefin Tuna,” said the Center for Biological Diversity in the headline from its press release issued in March 2012.¹⁴ Marine advocacy raises the question of whether another public—environmentalists—imagines the bluefin outside of a speciesist frame, as if a hierarchy of being is a biological fact. Although in principle I imagine they could, their public-facing campaigns suggest otherwise. The environmental campaigns I have tracked to “save” Atlantic bluefin tuna acknowledge how incredible bluefins are: how big they grow, how fast they travel, how massive their geographical range is. Yet their rhetoric reproduces the imaginary of tuna en masse—that is, as beings grouped by population, reduced to an abstract class of being, not treated as individuals, named, with personalities. To ensure their own credibility in the public sphere, environmentalists must rely on and craft their campaigns according to the latest science. But the science, as we know, doesn’t say very much about how sentient and agentive tunas are.¹⁵

¹³ See the article by Michael Conathan of the Center for American Progress from March 2012: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/green/news/2012/03/30/11359/fish-on-fridays-sustaining-the-wicked-tuna/>

¹⁴ See https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/news/press_releases/2012/bluefin-tuna-03-30-2012.html

¹⁵ See Telesca 2020 for a discussion of the financial pressure environmentalists are under in ways that shape the scope and direction of marine advocacy campaigns.

Another story about bluefins instead dominates: how overexploited they have become, no matter the ocean where they live. Gone are the days when most people assumed that there was always another fish in the sea, as if the ocean provides an unlimited inventory of fish for people to catch and eat. In fact, as a *New York Times* headline from November 1882 indicates, people once questioned whether there was life in the deep sea at all. Decades later, said the influential authors Hawthorne Daniel and Francis Minot in 1954, the seas were “inexhaustible,” their “endless resources” still awaiting development. They echoed the beliefs of Thomas Henry Huxley, the proponent of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, who famously claimed in 1884 “that nothing we do seriously affects the numbers of fish” (Huxley quoted in Cushing 1988: 117).

Their perspective stood in stark contrast to one offered by their contemporary, Rachel Carson, who in 1951 penned a loving portrait of the sea told from a scientific perspective in *The Sea Around Us*. It built on her first book, *Under the Sea-Wind* from 1941, a text underread but ahead of its time, I believe, because *Under the Sea-Wind* introduces audiences to the sea through intimate portraits that personify creatures who live there or near its shores, based on her first-person observations. Rynchops the skimmer, Scomber the mackerel, Anguilla the eel, and Uhvinguk the mouse, among others, are the cast of characters. They are protagonists, subjects, individuated, with proper names, appearing not at all en masse. Even so, published eighty years ago, Carson’s text represents its time. It is concerned with animal behavior. It flirts with—but does not centrally consider—an animal’s sentience, agency, and cognition.¹⁶

¹⁶ This distinction might be important. In Carson’s text, we hear a story of fishes caught by cork line who slowly die of suffocation, “for the twine interfered with the rhythmic respiratory

In many ways, the story of the bluefin is one of reckoning. Although overfishing has been happening for decades, if not centuries (Bolster 2012, Roberts 2007), the cod collapse in Canada's Atlantic provinces was an eye opener for the general public in the early 1990s. The first campaign to "save" bluefin tunas emerged at the same time, at least for the bluefins caught in the West Atlantic. The campaign emerged again in the mid 2000s but focused this time on bluefins caught in the East Atlantic and Mediterranean Sea. Both campaigns helped to establish the bluefin as an icon of overfishing on the high seas across the globe. The cultural narrative about their overexploitation ignited a moral panic, evidenced in such documentary films as *The End of the Line* (2009), *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011), *Racing Extinction* (2015), and, more recently, *Seaspiracy* (2021).

Written by Brooks team member Paul Greenberg, the cover story for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* embodies the anxiety in the headline from 2010: "Tuna's End: The Fate of the Bluefin, the Oceans, and Us". As I state in my book, it's a thoughtful piece. The images are striking, and somewhat break with the usual iconography. The bluefin is not pictured lynched, en masse, at capture, near death. Instead, she appears as an individual, sleek, glossy, out of water, dorsal fin here, tail with finlets there. Metallic-like, as streamlined as a finely tuned automobile, she nonetheless appears as object, as still life, as luxury good, which disavows how she thrives as agent. As I discuss in *Red Gold*, cultural narratives about the bluefin speak to what Renato Rosaldo (1989) calls "imperialist nostalgia," or the ways in which bourgeois publics as the

movements of the gill covers by which fish draw streams of water in through the mouth and pass them over the gills" (2007 [1941], 18).

beneficiaries of empire publicly mourn the loss of what they systematically commodify, consume, and destroy.

Section IV: Yellowfins and the Panic of Dolphin Bycatch

If the bluefin has become the fish most associated with overfishing on the high seas, then the tuna linked most to bycatch has been the yellowfin. The saga of what has become a marketing strategy for “dolphin-safe” tuna dominates headlines. It reveals how human-centric cultural narratives about tunas are.

Although reports first surfaced in 1968 about the staggering number of dolphins—spotted, spinner, common—killed to can tunas, public outcry erupted by the early 1970s. Writes Smith (2012): “Estimates of how many dolphins died annually in the [tuna] nets ranged from 100,000 in 1959 to 500,000 in the 1960s as more tuna boats were converted to purse seiners” (137). Unlike albacores, hooked by pole and line, yellowfins swim with dolphins surfacing to breathe. Fishers capitalized on their companionship. They located dolphins by speedboats, and corralled them, like cattle, by using nets as long as a mile and as deep as 400 feet, buoyed by corks. Yellowfins followed dolphins below, and swam into the nets too, entrapped, once cinched by powerful winches. Why bother with bait boats if purse seining was a more “efficient” method of tuna capture? By 1962, fishers landed 62 percent of tunas in the eastern tropical Pacific by setting their sights on dolphins using purse seines (Smith 2012: 136).

Fellow mammals suffered unnecessarily at the hand of industry. Yellowfins were a mere accessory in the plot. The television series, *Flipper* about the beloved bottlenose dolphin first aired in 1964. It established how human-like dolphins were: they had families, took care of their

young, performed tricks, entertained, vocalized, and smiled for the camera, or so it seemed. The *Los Angeles Times* wrote of dolphins in an editorial from January 1972: “gentle, affectionate creatures with so many characteristics of human beings that they are often described as man’s first cousin in the animal kingdom” (quoted in Smith 2012: 138). Dick Cavett, Bridget Fonda, and George C. Scott—celebrities all—narrated various programs in the 1970s for popular audiences on television. They showed heart-breaking images of squealing dolphins, stressed, frantic to escape tuna nets, or already dead in them. Industry appeared unable to reform, despite the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972.

A watershed moment came in 1987, when Sam LaBudde, winner of the Goldman Environmental Prize in 1991, went undercover for months to film the extractive tuna operation out of Ensenada, Mexico. His footage of the horror of mass death appeared on nightly news, including CBS and ABC networks. He testified before Congress. Together they exposed how massive the slaughter of dolphins was. The visibility of the story sullied leading brands, prompted legal reform, and galvanized public support for a tuna boycott.¹⁷ Hollywood caught on. A scene in *Lethal Weapon II* from 1989 showed its protagonist scolded by his wife and kids for “killing Flipper” when eating a tuna sandwich. (He’s told to eat ham or pig instead.) Cultural references about the dolphin kill were prevalent. Evidenced in headlines from the *New York Times*, the story continued into the 2000s with coverage about how challenging it was to balance protection for marine mammals with supplying consumers with a staple meat. As recently as

¹⁷ Smith claims: “Despite the boycott, between 1988 and 1990, sales of StarKist tuna increased from \$115 million to \$145 million” (2012: 143). It is beyond the scope of this report to assess how successful the boycott was from the perspective of yellowfins.

April 2021, Forbes published the article, “The Origin of the Dolphin-Safe Tuna Label” accompanied by an image of stacked cans of StarKist differentiated by how white the fillet is.

Absent, muted, void in the chronicle of “dolphin-safe” tuna is the plight of the yellowfins. Bycatch matters most, it seems, when mammals and other familiar creatures with land-based counterparts, such as sea turtles, become collaterally damaged. Unfortunately, the waste produced by wrongful target does not become central to popular discourse when the beings pained are, say, seabirds. It’s worth acknowledging that one of the most successful documentary films about dolphins—*The Cove*, winner of the Academy Award for best feature-length documentary film in 2009—never mentioned the slaughter or the toxicity of the tunas who swim with the dolphins.

The wildly popular series, *Blue Planet II*, narrated by Sir David Attenborough and released in 2017 by the BBC Natural History Unit, includes yellowfins twice. Available on Netflix for US audiences, the episode “Big Blue” shows yellowfins cooperating with spinner dolphins in the chase for lanternfish, while in the episode “Coasts” yellowfins become the prey of the sea lions who have outwit them in the Galápagos. It was the most watched of all television programs in Britain in 2017. From the perspective of animal sentience, agency, and cognition, the series missed the opportunity to shed light on our kin’s inner worlds. Instead, audiences got another two-dimensional version of the predator-prey relationship.

Section V: Albacores and the Panic of Toxicity

If bluefins are linked to overfishing, and yellowfins to bycatch, then in albacores we have a panic about toxicity. Again, it is worth emphasizing that these stories are bereft of a tuna having an

emotional life. Like the rest of her tuna kin, the albacore comes to viewers near, at, or after death.

The first indication I could detect of the toxic connection to albacores in the *New York Times* came in April 1963 when it published an article about two women from Detroit who died of botulism from tainted canned tuna. The story doesn't mention albacores but the caption does. The association continues thereafter, despite the fact that methylmercury has been documented in bigeyes and yellowfins since the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) released a study in 1971. By 2000, concern about toxic tunas targeted pregnant women and young children, once the Committee on the Toxicological Effects of Methylmercury of the National Academy of Science suggested these groups avoid "white tuna," which, as we already learned in this report, is code for albacore. A year later, the FDA warned pregnant women to not eat some fishes—swordfishes, sharks, king mackerels, tilefishes—because methylmercury in them could harm a fetus. To the ire of some experts, "white tuna" was suspiciously left off the list.

By March 2004, the FDA was explicit: "Albacore ('white') tuna has more mercury than canned light tuna. So, when choosing your two meals of fish and shellfish, you may eat up to 6 ounces (one average meal) of albacore tuna per week." At the same time, it stated that fish and shellfish were important to a healthy diet. The uneven recommendations prompted consumer protection nonprofits, including Ralph Nader's US Public Interest Research Group, to request all transcripts and reports used in the FDA's decision-making process through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). They revealed the pressure the US Tuna Foundation, Bumble Bee, StarKist, Chicken of the Sea, and the National Food Processors Association put on FDA

officials. Industry feared it would be buried in class action lawsuits and suffer losses in revenue. Industry—not everyday citizens—appeared the protected constituency at this time.

Confusion about which fishes are safe to eat is widespread to this day. Headlines in the *New York Times* express the uncertainty, from “Fears (Real and Excessive) From Pollution Warning on Tuna” (April 2004) to “Touting the Benefits of Fish” (October 2006). Stories tell consumers to regulate their intake of tunas while at the same time they recommend that people enjoy them as a healthy food choice: low in fat and cholesterol, and high in protein and omega-3 fatty acids. At a time when “weapons of mass destruction” never materialized in the US military invasion of Iraq, the columnist Paul Krugman opened his opinion piece from April 2004 headlined “The Mercury Scandal” with this:

If you want a single example that captures why so many people no longer believe in the good intentions of the Bush administration, look at the case of mercury pollution.

Mercury can damage the nervous system, especially in fetuses and infants -- which is why the Food and Drug Administration warns pregnant women and nursing mothers against consuming types of fish, like albacore tuna, that often contain high mercury levels.

A regulatory agency seemed as untrustworthy as the presidency in the chronicles of death narratives about tunas in America.

To be clear, the association of toxicity in sushi-grade (not canned) tuna has made headlines in the *New York Times*, such as “Tests find hazardous levels of mercury in tuna sushi in New York” in January 2008. But the prevalence of stories about polluted sushi is just not as

widespread as it is in stories about canned tuna.¹⁸ While there might be various reasons for this, the fact remains: in the popular imagination the “glamour fish” is not widely seen as toxic to the elites who conspicuously consume this kind of meat. Moreover, the preoccupation with lethal fish replays how deep and dominant anthropocentrism is in popular culture. Studies—and the news stories about them—worry about what toxicity does to people, not what it does to tunas.

Section VI: “Sorry, Charlie:” Animations Are Anthropocentric Too

“The real must be fictionalized in order to be thought,” explains Jacques Rancière (2000: 38). Indeed, if there is a place at all to imagine the inner lives of tunas, then it is fiction. This mode of representation allows producers a creative license to fancy the worlds of fishes without the burden of scientific proof. Illustration gives audiences the chance to personalize, individuate, name, and treat tunas as beings with emotional lives in the social context where they live. Even so, some of these representations are so anthropomorphized that tunas merely deputize for human preoccupations.

The most famous tuna of all in American culture is Charlie, the mascot of the StarKist brand of canned tuna. He joins Mr. Peanut and the Energizer Bunny for making one of the most successful runs in commercial history. So fruitful was the Charlie campaign that StarKist remains America’s most popular canned tuna brand, in large part due to Charlie’s stardom in an advertising drive now sixty years old.

¹⁸ It is unclear to me why coverage of toxicity singles out the albacores who are sold as “white tuna.” It might be worth viewing the transcripts produced by the FOIA request. I wonder if the preoccupation with albacores can be read on a meta level: the fear of contagion speaks to the fear of White power dethroned.

Charlie Tuna burst onto the advertising scene in 1961. First animated by DePatie-Freleng, the same company from Burbank, California that gave audiences the Pink Panther, Charlie is the invention of Tom Rogers of the Leo Burnett Agency. A fifty-eight year old Beatnik, hipster today, Charlie with his unmistakable Brooklyn accent has changed little over decades. Debonair and desperate, all dolled up and nowhere to go, sometimes with bow tie, Charlie has retained his beret and thick black glasses as props to hammer home the fact that his smooth talking, loose lips will never be enough to cajole StarKist into catching him. No matter how hard Charlie tries StarKist always rebuffs him. The brand is selective. StarKist gives customers only the best quality tuna, which is why the label is trustworthy, so the seductions of marketing go. The commercial ends every time with the same line delivered by Danny Dark, the voice of Superman: “Sorry, Charlie. StarKist doesn’t want tuna with good taste. StarKist wants tuna that tastes good!”

The popularity of the advertising campaign cannot be overstated. “Sorry, Charlie” is part of the American cultural lexicon. According to the Urban Dictionary, “Sorry, Charlie” is defined as “A lack of sympathy. A form of ‘get over it.’ I won’t help you.” There is now an annual “Sorry, Charlie Day” to commiserate with anyone who has been rejected on April 6. According to Joe Wos, described as StarKist’s “brand character integrity consultant” in *Adweek*, “Charlie has this everyman feel to him. He’s a character we can really identify with. We’re all seeking acceptance” (Klara 2019). Charlie represents the everyday, common man in tuna dress.

Charlie is a significant figure in the death narratives of tunas in America. That is, *Charlie is the only tuna that cannot be caught and killed*. And that’s the advertisement’s genius. The marketing campaign upends the image of death so dominant in representations of tunas, so much

so that audiences are called to attention by its opposite through humor, light-heartedness, and self-identification. Equally as subversive, the continuous dismissal of Charlie by a leading brand can also be read as an experience of everyday people who can't get ahead when powerful players control the game—that is, the ones who “won't help you.” In short, people see themselves in Charlie—and buy StarKist—but the inner worlds of tunas they do not see.

Another significant depiction of tunas in animated fiction is meant for children: Pixar's *Finding Nemo*, winner of the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature in 2003.¹⁹ In one lone scene, one of the lead characters, Dory, gets trapped by purse seiners hauling up what appears to be a sack of tunas by the flash of faint yellow on their fins. Tunas appear again en masse, but this time the audience sees them panicked, frantic, suffering, suffocating once they breach the sea surface. To ensure fellow kin are not killed, Nemo, the young clownfish, directs the tunas to swim downward. He knows that the power of collective action will free the fishes from the net. Here tunas communicate and work together. Tunas chant, in unison, “Keep swimming! Keep swimming!” They heave and ho and through teamwork snap the rope attached to the net, which releases them all to the bottom of the sea. It's a scary scene—the only one to my knowledge to date that allows mainstream audiences to feel empathy with tunas at near death.

¹⁹ It is worth exploring another adventure program for children—the animated series *Octonauts*—which features as one of its main characters Tunip, who is part tuna, part turnip and is regarded as the smallest crew member. It appears that a bluefin might have been featured in a “creature report,” which is a regular segment of the show that details facts about a different sea creature with each episode. I haven't been able to track down quality video to understand what it says. However, it does appear that cetaceans and octopuses feature regularly in the show. In the 128 episodes released over four seasons, including special episodes, it appears that one is dedicated to the companionship between a yellowfin and a dolphin.

The compulsion to organize and repeat images of death has become a precondition for extracting a tuna's value as mere food and entertainment. Too often animal sentience, cognition, and agency is dismissed and denigrated as marginal, soft, sentimental, feminine, emotional, and nostalgic. To quote Mbembe, "The spirit of the times is not only about survival. It is also about a renewed *will to kill* as opposed to a *will to care*, a will to sever all relationships as opposed to the will to engage in the exacting labor of repairing the ties that have broken" (2019: 107, emphasis in original). The invitation to reconnect with and become mindful of the vulnerability of life—on its own terms—is before us, not only as a matter of individual ethics. Care in law, politics, knowledge production, and other domains of action implies that cultures move beyond anthropocentrism, on all scales, across all domains, for all lives to flourish.

Works Cited

- Adams, Carol J. 2015 [1990]. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*. Bloombury Academic.
- Balcombe, Jonathan. 2016. *What a Fish Knows: The Inner Lives of Our Underwater Cousins*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Benson, Rodney and Matthew Powers. 2011. "Public Media and Political Independence." *Public Policy Report*. Washington, DC: Free Press.
- Bolster, W. Jeffrey. 2012. *The Mortal Sea: Fishing the Atlantic in the Age of Sail*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Braithwaite, Victoria. 2010. *Do Fish Feel Pain?* New York: Oxford University Press.
- Carson, Rachel. 2007 [1941]. *Under the Sea-Wind*. New York: Penguin Classics.

- Cushing, David H. 1988. *The Provident Sea*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Daniel, Hawthorne and Francis Minot. 1961 (1954). *The Inexhaustible Sea*. New York: Collier Books.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25/26: 56-80.
- Freeman, Andrea. 2013. "The Unbearable Whiteness of Milk: Food Oppression and the USDA." *UC Irvine Law Review* 3: 1251-1279.
- Hall, Stuart. 1997. *The Work of Representation*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Holder, Charles F. 1910. *The Channel Islands of California: A Book for the Angler, Sportsman, and Tourist*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Issenberg, Sasha. 2007. *The Sushi Economy: Globalization and the Making of a Modern Delicacy*. New York: Gotham.
- Klara, Robert. 2019. "StarKist: How a 58-Year-Old Talking Fish Named Charlie Convinced Americans to Eat Canned Tuna." *Adweek*.
- Martin, C. R. 2019. *No Longer Newsworthy: How the Mainstream Media Abandoned the Working Class*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Marvin, Garry. 1988. *Bullfight*. University of Illinois Press.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- McChesney, Robert. 2008. *The Political Economy of Media*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill. New York: Continuum, 2004.

Roberts, Callum. 2007. *The Unnatural History of the Sea*. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Rosaldo, Renato. 1989. "Imperialist Nostalgia." *Representations* 26: 107-122.

Smith, Andrew F. *American Tuna: The Rise and Fall of an Improbable Food*. Berkeley, CA:
University of California Press.

Stănescu, Vasile. 2018. 'White Power Milk': Milk, Dietary Racism, and the 'Alt-Right.' *Animal Studies Journal* 7(2): 103-128.

Telesca, Jennifer E. 2017. "Accounting for Loss In Fish 'Stocks': A Word on Life as Biological Asset." *Environment and Society: Advances in Research* 8: 144-160.

Telesca, Jennifer E. 2020. *Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna*.
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Vettese, Troy, Becca Franks, and Jennifer Jacquet. 2020. "The Great Fish Pain Debate." *Issues in Science and Technology* 4: 49-53.

**Tuna en Masse: Necrograms and Representations of
the Living Dead**

Jennifer E. Telesca, PhD

Report for the Brooks Institute

Figure 1

Ken Fraser registers the largest, IGFA all-tackle bluefin tuna ever recorded at 1,496 pounds (679 kilos) on October 26, 1979, caught while trolling Aulds Cove, Nova Scotia, Canada. The photo looks like a lynching to me. Photograph courtesy of the International Gamefish Association (IGFA).



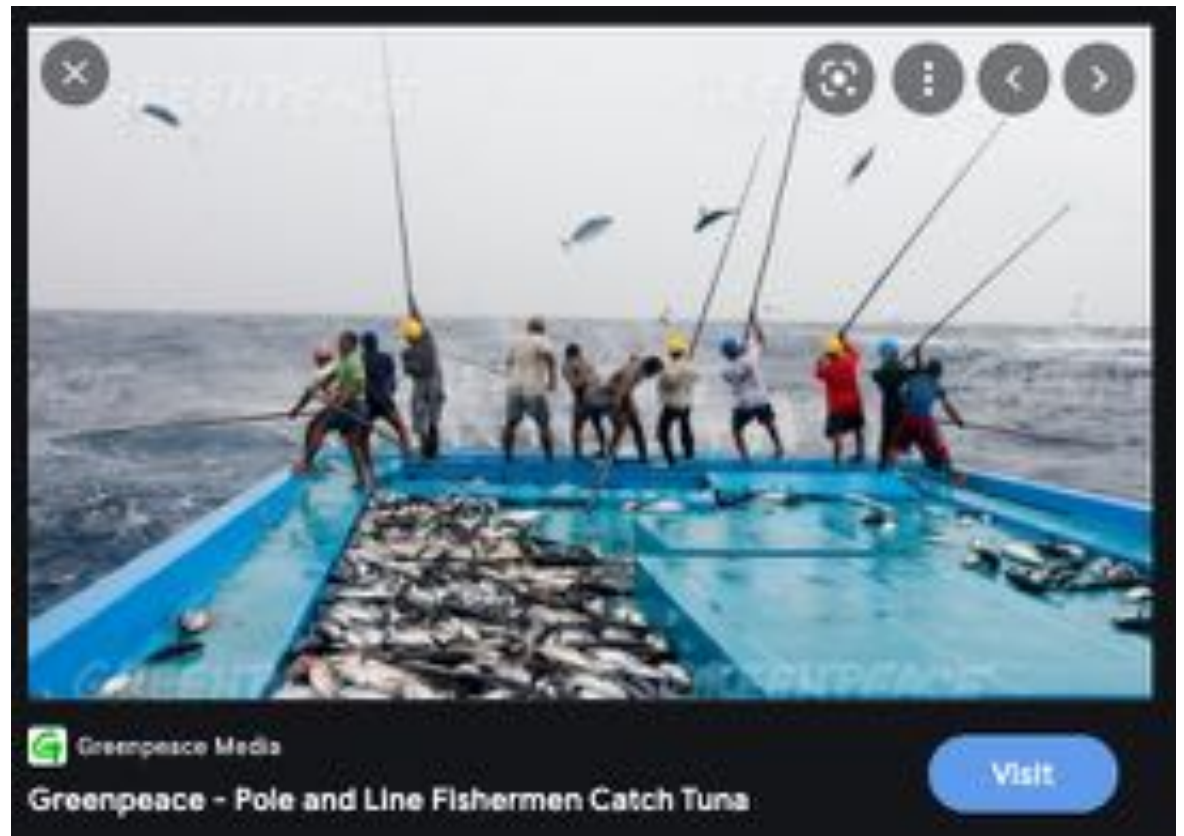
Figure 2

This popular image of tuna en masse by Brian Skerry shows bluefin captured inside the net of a purse seiner in Spain. The illusion of life is eclipsed by the fact that these tunas are nearing death as fishers ready them for market.



Figure 3

Another popular image of tunas at or near death when caught by pole and line, here in Asia.





HEALTH
Assessing the
real risks of
pollutants.
Environmental
Page C4



FILM
For the latest
on the
cinematic
Page C11



ART
Last summer
of...
Page C15



DANCE
Shining...
Page C13

The Living Section

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 13, 1997



From left to right: A China cup, an electric, the old-time waffle maker preferred by
Cecilia D'Amico of the Queen Anne-Catharine Woodbridge-Coles.

In Kitchen Tools, Old Friends Are Best Friends

By Sarah Bass

A little more than a decade ago, the kitchen was a place of modernity and convenience. It was a place where the latest and greatest appliances were the norm. But now, in the kitchen, old friends are the ones who are best friends. Cecilia D'Amico, a 65-year-old widow who lives in a small apartment in the Bronx, has a collection of kitchen tools that she has used for decades. She has a waffle maker that she has used since she was a child, a China cup that she has used for years, and an electric waffle maker that she has used for years. She says that these tools are her best friends because they are reliable and they have been with her through thick and thin.

and her collection of kitchen tools is a testament to the fact that old friends are the best friends. She says that these tools are her best friends because they are reliable and they have been with her through thick and thin. She says that these tools are her best friends because they are reliable and they have been with her through thick and thin.



Unpredictable cornucopia arrives: Sharing in the Harvest, C4.

Canned Tuna: In Search Of Flavor And Texture

By Kenneth Rosen

A lthough it is hard to believe, the tuna can industry is in a state of flux. For the first time in decades, consumers are being offered a variety of choices. A company that has been a leader in the industry for years is now being challenged by a newcomer. This is the first time in decades that consumers have had a choice of canned tuna. The industry has been dominated by a few major players for years, but now there is a new player on the block. This new player is offering a variety of choices that are different from what consumers have been used to. This is the first time in decades that consumers have had a choice of canned tuna.

Have to have...
page C4



Safari Skills: How to Get Elephants Drunk

By Kenneth Rosen

Many of us have seen a herd of elephants in the wild. They are majestic animals that have lived on the Earth for millions of years. But what if you could get elephants drunk? It sounds like a far-fetched idea, but it is not as impossible as it seems. There are ways to get elephants drunk, and it is not as complicated as it might seem. This is a story about how to get elephants drunk.

...
page C11



Figure 4
Stacks of tunas long dead, canned, appear in the *New York Times* in August 1997, alongside the headline, "Safari Skills: How to Get Elephants Drunk."

Figure 5

Here are common images of dead bluefins chopped up at Tsukiji marketplace in Tokyo, including one of the record sale at auction with her buyer.



2500 x 1677

NBC News

Bluefin goes for \$3 million at 1st 2019 sale at Tokyo market

Visit



Smithsonian Ocean - Smithsonian Institution

Bluefin at Tsukiji Fish Market | Smithsonian Ocean

Visit

Figure 6

A still of the most popular video on YouTube about tunas, picturing a bluefin sliced up and already dead in a “traditional” open-air market.

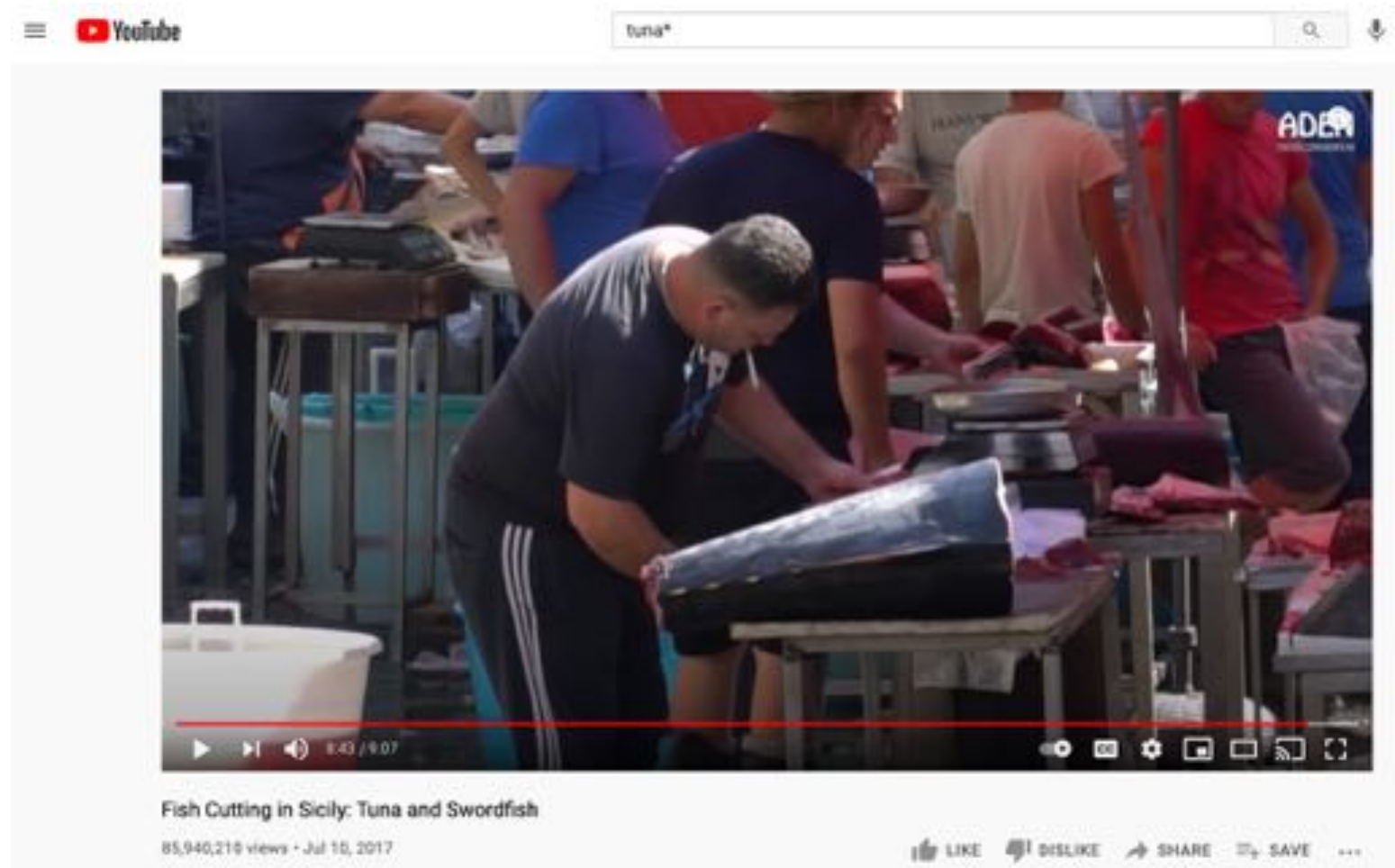


Figure 7

Another still, here of "Red gold" on the cheap, for five euros, in Sicily.



Figure 8

A still of "Bikini Girls" catching yellowfin on YouTube.

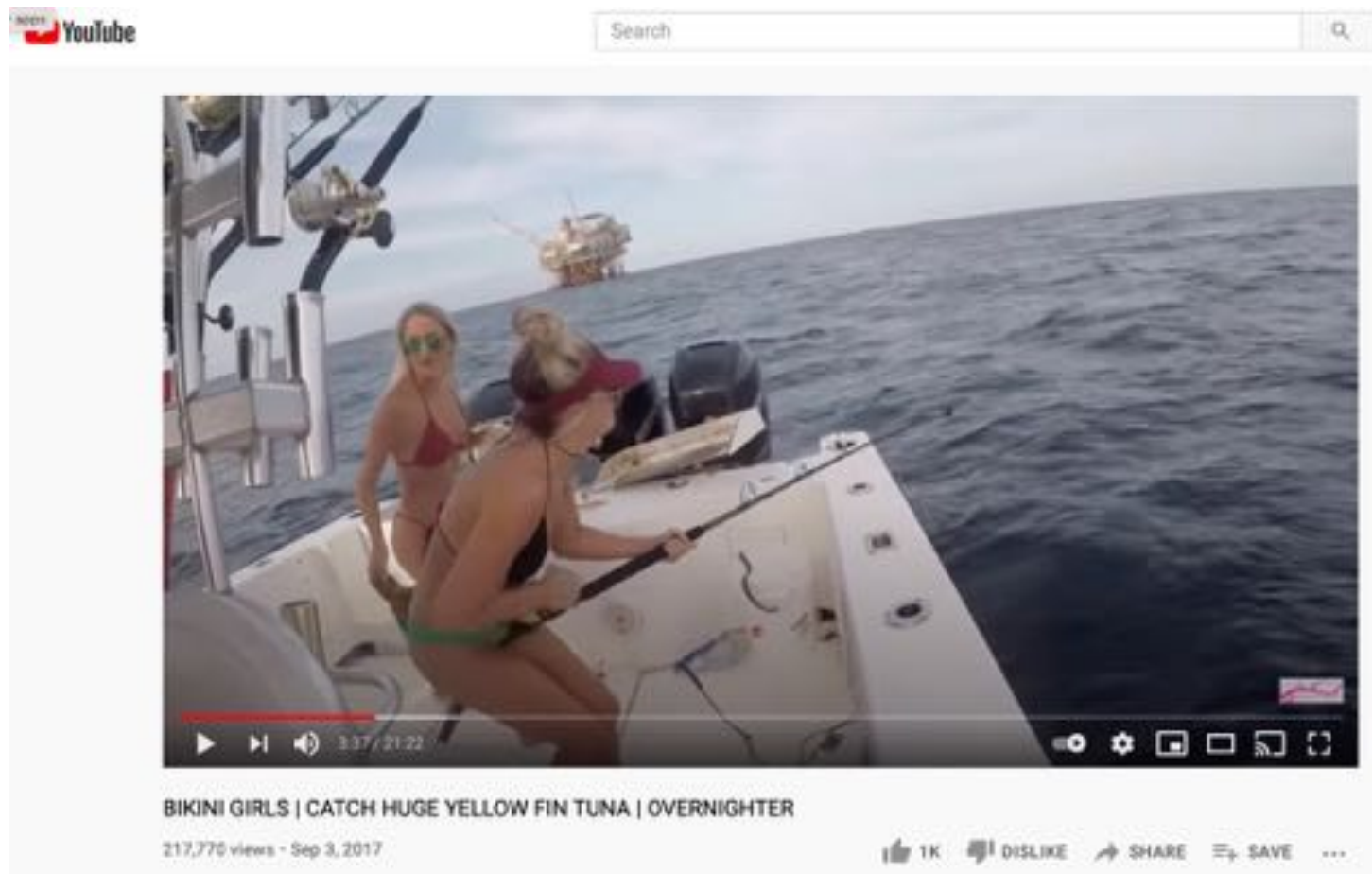


Figure 9

Here's the cover image of the popular recreational fishing magazine, *SaltWater Sportsman*, which marketers use to sell subscriptions on the website, www.magazines.com.



Figure 10

Here's a promotional image used for *Wicked Tuna*, which first aired in 2012. It's now enjoying its tenth season.





Figure 11


The cover of the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* by Brooks team member Paul Greenberg in June 2010.

Forbes

The Origin Of The “Dolphin-Safe” Tuna Label

Liz Allen Contributor
Science
Liz writes about the ocean and its protection. [Follow](#)

Listen to this article now 09:19
Powered by Trinity Audio



The U.S. government began regulating the use of dolphin-safe tuna labels in the 1990s. GETTY IMAGES

Figure 12

More canned tuna, stacked, here featuring the different grades of “white” meat in an article from *Forbes* dated April 2021.

Support the Guardian Available for everyone, funded by readers
Contribute → Subscribe →

Search jobs Sign in

News Opinion Sport Culture Lifestyle More

Australia Coronavirus World AU politics Environment Football Indigenous Australia Immigration **Media** Business Sci

TV ratings

This article is more than 3 years old

Blue Planet II is year's most watched British TV show

First episode of BBC's latest David Attenborough series seen by 14.1 million, beating Strictly and a struggling X Factor

Graham Ruddick Media editor
Mon 6 Nov 2017 14:39 EST

f t e



Figure 13

A missed opportunity to share the inner lives of tunas in *Blue Planet II*, aired in the US on Netflix.

MONDAY, APRIL 8, 1963.

Safeguards Are Doubled by Tuna Cannery

Two Detroit Deaths Spur New Caution in the Industry

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M., April 7 — Customary procedures have been "redoubled" in the tuna-canning industry here because of the recent deaths of two women in Detroit, Mich., from mercury-infused tunas.

The diseased tunas came from another cannery's product, and the California State Health Department, which located a slight additional spillage of the same code, reported that "tuna from other packers is not involved."

Beagle Bay Seafoods, Inc., a wholly owned subsidiary of Oscar & Cook, Inc., of Honolulu, is located in Astoria, where it canned nearly 50,000 cases last year, 80 per cent of them tunas.

Every can is coded by a stamp on the lid that denotes the day, month and year of packing, the production line that processed the fish, and the container by species, grade and code.

Inspection of the fish is conducted by the state health department, a self-inspected packing system established by the National Canners Association, and through standards established by the Food and Drug Administration.

Temperature Kill Germs

The cans are already sealed when they come off the end of the production line. Large quantities are taken by fork lift trucks to the processing plants, where the high temperatures are said to kill all germs.



Albacore tunas are processed at the Beagle Bay Seafoods company cannery in Astoria, Ore.

Beagle Bay has not felt any effect in the market from the incident. They point out that this is not the biggest reason for sale of their products, and it would be difficult to tell the general public or retailers if they will in fact, since they do little business in Detroit, they would not expect any sales drop there. New York is their biggest market.

The concern, which largely relies on imported frozen Japanese tunas, discredited appeared criticism of American companies using fish from the Orient. A spokesman said fishermen was "too many untrustworthy" in the tuna is question having been

thought by a Japanese fisher-appearing grounds damaged the rest that if it had been caught by Americans.

On arrival in Astoria, all the Beagle Bay services were found of the Columbia River. The fish is placed in the canneries' 500-gal cold storage tanks. When processed in the plant, the fish is washed, cooked, canned and packed in the Columbia River and along the coast, and then shipped to the Pacific coast, where it is sold. Beagle Bay has been a major producer in the United States. They have plants in Maryland and Hawaii in addition to a company of 50 tons of fish in Oregon.

Beagle Bay's 1962 sales were \$10,000,000. They had 1,000 employees last year, and their sales for the first three months of 1963 were \$2,500,000. Their sales for the first three months of 1962 were \$2,500,000.

When the advent of good April 1962 their records for sales on the coast of the North Pacific were not complete but were, the fishermen advised that it is recognized that they did not believe that the preceding year

Figure 14
The first story in the New York Times linking toxic tunas to albacores came in April 1963. These ones are already dead at the cannery.

StarKist.



1961

1969

1976



1999

2011

2017

Charlie Through The Years

© 2017 StarKist

Figure 15

Charlie the Tuna is one of the most successful ad campaigns in commercial history, spanning six decades for the canned tuna brand StarKist.

Figure 16

Charlie is the only tuna that cannot be killed, which explains the advertisement's genius.



Figure 17

A still of *Finding Nemo* (2003), which shows panicked tunas and the character Dory trapped by purse seiners.



List of Major Cultural Productions about Tunas in the US (in chronological order by year)

Event	Year
<i>Under the Sea-Wind</i> (book of nature writing by Rachel Carson)	1941
<i>Stromboli</i> (film by Roberto Rossellini)	1950
<i>The Old Man and the Sea</i> (novel by Ernest Hemingway)	1951
<i>Charlie the Tuna</i> (animated advertisements for SunKist)	1961 (first aired, still running today)
<i>Swimmy</i> (children's picture book by Leo Lionni)	1963
<i>Finding Nemo</i> (animated film)	2003
<i>Newlyweds: Nick and Jessica</i> (reality TV program on MTV)	2003 (episode about tuna as chicken)
<i>Wicked Tuna</i> (reality TV program on National Geographic)	Since 2012 (now in its tenth season)
<i>End of the Line</i> (documentary film)	2009
<i>Jiro Dreams of Sushi</i> (documentary film)	2011
<i>Racing Extinction</i> (documentary film)	2015
<i>Blue Planet II</i> (documentary TV series available in the US through Netflix)	2017
<i>Fish Cutting in Sicily: Tuna and Swordfish</i> (YouTube, 86 million views)	2017
* <i>Seaspiracy</i> (documentary film)	2021
* <i>The Dark Hobby</i> (documentary film about tropical fishes, not tunas)	2021

*These are the only two films, widely distributed, that to my knowledge reference the agency, sentience, and cognition of fishes through the work of the ethologist Jonathan Balcombe (2016), featured as a talking head. Even so, these films do not address the inner and social worlds of tunas per se.