

FEATURES

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Off the coast of Malta, bobbing in the Mediterranean waters, a flotilla of fishing boats is waiting to net swarms of bluefin tuna before the catching season ends last this month.

The tuna aren't the only ones being hunted.

Environmental campaigners are waiting too, their binoculars and monitoring devices trained not on the sea but on the trawlers.

"Actually, I want them to start fishing," said Oliver Knowles, a campaigner for Greenpeace, which wants a moratorium on bluefin tuna fishing and has sent two ships to the Mediterranean to try to disrupt the hunt.

"You want a little environmental destruction, so you get to say something about it," he told his young crew of 26 on board the organization's flagship *Rainbow Warrior*.

"There's a perversity about being a campaigner — you have to hope for some bad news. I don't want them to fish.

"But actually, unless we raise the political temperature on this, and get them to stop, they can come back year after year after year."

At any one time there are a dozen or more vessels in an area large enough for them to remain out of sight of each other. From France, Spain, Turkey and elsewhere. Some barely move, and others shift constantly.

BIG IN JAPAN

Many of the boats carry net cages used to encircle the tuna swarms, which are then towed offshore to be fattened and shipped in giant freezer ships to Japan, where it is a mainstay of sushi and sashimi.

The larger and fatter, the more valuable they are — the biggest specimens can fetch more than US\$100,000 at the Tsukiji fish market in Tokyo.

Industrial-scale fishing and harvesting on the high seas has caused

As the end of the fishing season approaches, Greenpeace chases fishing boats around the Mediterranean hoping to disrupt the hunt

BY DAVIDE BERRETTA
AFP, ON BOARD THE RAINBOW WARRIOR

stocks to plunge by up to 80 percent in the Mediterranean and eastern Atlantic, where they come to spawn in the warmer waters.

Earlier this year the EU and the US attempted to ban the trade of the species, but Japan lobbied successfully and the proposal was defeated.

The focus has now returned to the open waters until the tuna season ends on June 15, and Greenpeace flew reporters by helicopter onto the *Rainbow Warrior* to follow its side of the chase.

Leaning over nautical maps and compasses, Knowles and his crew monitor the trawlers, looking for signs they might have found a swarm.

"If they start circling or their speed slows down," he said, "it's usually an indication that they at least think they've got a shoal of fish."

That's the point when the Greenpeace activists want to step in to disrupt any fishing to "stop them taking the fish out of the water," said Knowles.

Greenpeace refuses to divulge what kind of tactics it might employ. Last month, activists on board rafts temporarily blocked three tuna fishing vessels from leaving the port

of Sete, in southern France.

WAITING FOR ACTION

There is little time left. The wrangling over a ban piled further pressure on the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) to shorten the fishing season to four weeks this year and shrink the quota of bluefin tuna that can be caught from 19,500 tonnes to 13,500 tonnes in 2010.

"Most scientists thought the quotas were higher than they should be," said Audun Lem, a fishery trade expert at the Food and Agriculture Organization.

Italy went further and imposed a moratorium on industrial fishing of tuna this year, paying its fishermen and companies US\$12.3 million to keep their boats at harbor.

The 49-strong tuna fleet, now being reduced to nine, "was subsidized to be built. It is now subsidized to stay at home. And it will be subsidized to be destroyed," said Francois Chartier, a campaigner on board the *Arctic Sunrise*, the other Greenpeace vessel in the Mediterranean. "It is a total aberration."

If everyone respected their quota, "we should have an improvement" in the situation, said Massimo Spagnolo, who heads a research institute close to the fishing industry.

Spagnolo, who says quotas are not a good idea because they encourage early and intensive fishing before the tuna can spawn, believes ICCAT has overstated the danger facing the species.

"If you go to the Tirrenian Sea there is a lot of tuna," he said, referring to waters off Italy's west coast.

South of Malta, however, it's apparently not warm enough yet to draw tuna. The *Rainbow Warrior* has been at sea for more than a week but hasn't been able to disrupt any fishing.

"There's a good selection of vessels all around us," Knowles said. "We'll just have to keep watching. We just have to be patient."

[ENVIRONMENT]

A stone's throw from the Nile, Egypt's taps are running dry

Poor planning policies are being blamed for a lack of potable water

BY NATASHA YAZBECK
AFP, KIRDASA, EGYPT

Six months into her pregnancy, Tahani Rabia continues to ignore doctor's orders and rises before dawn every morning, praying that when she turns on the tap the water will flow.

But more often than not, the rusty tap runs dry in her little home a mere 10km from the Nile River.

"The doctor told me I had to rest, but I get up around 5am because if there is any water in the pipes it runs out by seven," said the veiled 18-year-old, who lives on the outskirts of Kirdasa in Egypt's Giza governorate.

"I can't carry water back from the Nile because it's too heavy with the baby and it's not suitable to drink anyway, so I store as much as I can from the tap and ration our daily use," she explained.

"When we run out, we turn to our neighbors to see if they have any to spare."

The tap in the single room that Tahani shares with her husband hasn't worked for days, and the neighbors have been a lifesaver.

Hers is a story echoed across Egypt, where thousands living just a stone's throw from the Nile suffer supply and sanitation problems as their government becomes increasingly entangled in a war over water with up-river nations.

Egypt has dominated the Nile for decades and refuses, along with neighboring Sudan, to sign a new pact the other countries say would lead to more equitable sharing.

In an attempt to secure larger shares of the precious resource, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda all signed the agreement earlier this month.

That prompted Cairo to launch a diplomatic offensive in hopes of ensuring the country is not brushed aside in a matter vital to the country's future.

Egypt, which relies on the river to meet 90 percent of the water needs of its 80 million people, argues that it has a historic right to the Nile and has threatened legal action to preserve its interests.

But experts say the pact will have little effect on the people of Egypt, whose troubles stretch far back and stem mainly from outdated water grids and flawed domestic water policies.

"The problem is the distribution of the water — who is using it and for what — and equity in people's right to safe water," said Habib Ayeh, a geopolitical expert and researcher at the American University in Cairo.

Green golf courses and lush parks today decorate the landscape of Cairo's uptown suburbs, once desert land.

But Ayeh, who recently authored a book on the demise of Egypt's *fellahs*, or farmers, estimates that one in four Egyptians does not have adequate access to drinking water.

"The water sent to people's homes is not enough to meet minimal needs because of both quantity and the power with which it is pumped through the grid," he said.

Farmers in the northern region of Daqahliya took to the streets this week to protest over inadequate supplies for drinking and irrigation — a problem that is expected to worsen with rising temperatures and rapid population growth.

Hosni Khordagui, who heads the United Nations Development Program's regional water program in Cairo, warns that the number of people living under the "water poverty" line in Egypt will snowball over the next decade.

"The problem is that 85 percent of our water from the Nile goes to irrigation and it would be difficult to reallocate that to other uses because of the economic revenue it brings in," Khordagui said.

Even if the new deal does not cut back on Egypt's share of the Nile, water poverty is a daunting reality as the population grows by an estimated 1.5 million people annually, Khordagui said.

Six decades ago, Egypt offered each citizen an average of 2,600m³ of water per year, according to Khordagui. By 2025, he estimates the average will drop to 500m³.

For the people of Kirdasa, it is a warning that hits home hard.

"It's been four days since we last had drinking water in these taps," says Mona, another resident of Kirdasa. "You get used to it, but this is no way to live. We pay our bills. Where is our water?"

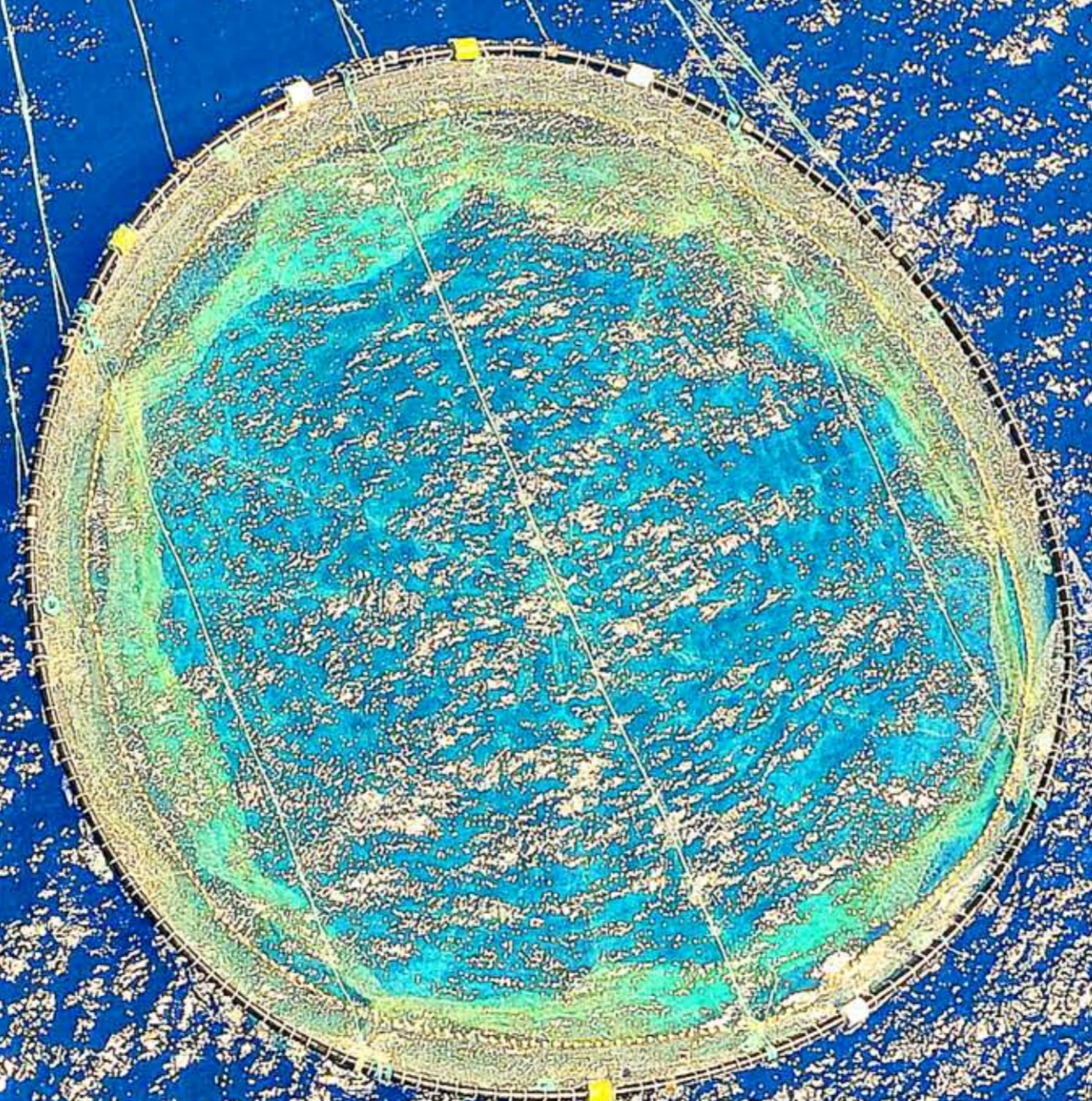
Ayeh notes that Egypt, which is entitled to 55.5 billion cubic meters of Nile water annually under treaties signed more than 50 years ago, has no solution but to rethink how it divides the resource.

"There is no link between Egypt's current water problem and the new pact," he added.

"The problem is that people cannot drink and yet Egypt is exporting strawberries in December."

Bluefin tuna

play hard to get in waiting game



Top: Heads of Atlantic bluefin tuna lay on a fishing vessel on the Mediterranean Sea near Garrucha, Spain.

Middle: Moonlight illuminates the sail of the *Rainbow Warrior*, Greenpeace's flagship vessel, as it cruises the Mediterranean on May 24 as part of a protest action against bluefin tuna fishing dubbed "Stop the Bluefin Tuna Massacre — Create Marine Reserves Now!"

Above: Greenpeace ship *Arctic Sunrise* navigates the Mediterranean on May 25.

Right: An unseen tuna fishing boat drags a cage of nets on the Mediterranean near Malta.

PHOTOS: AFP



Girls stand in line at a water cistern to fill their containers with clean water at al-Rahawe village some 40km northeast of Cairo on May 27.

PHOTO: AFP