

Fishermen banking on tuna catch and release



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P.E.I. fishermen hope a recreational catch and release fishery for bluefin tuna could become a way to expand the tourism aspect of their industry while not infringing on the sustainability of the resource.

A catch and release idea could be a big plum for tuna fishers and a recent study on mortality rates was presented to the P.E.I. Fishermen's Association.

"No other place in the world are the bluefin tuna of this size available to anglers on day trips so close to shore," said Dr. Mike Stokesbury, a Canada Research Chair in Ecology of Coastal Environments, and professor at Acadia University.

"Because of this there is an opportunity to develop a catch and release industry in the southern Gulf of St. Lawrence that will attract tourists both nationally and internationally."

Stokesbury said as long as a catch and release fishery is run in a responsible, regulated and sustainable way, it could be a good thing for the industry. The data collected regarding mortality rates showed low exposures.

The P.E.I. tuna fishery is currently a quota based operation and last year saw its 132 metric tonne fall allotment landed within about 48 hours with almost 75 per cent of the 300 estimated fishers landing.

"When quota is made that tends to end the fishery," said Mike McGeoghegan, president of the association. "We want to find a way to extend that season so fishermen can take advantage of a catch and release sports fishery."

Stokesbury said researchers used satellite tags to determine the mortality rate of bluefin tuna that were captured and then released during the experimental fishery last fall. He said only two of 59 bluefin tuna died and fish were not brought on board the vessel. Fight times, he said, ranged from 6 to 79 minutes.

"These are robust fish and caught in relatively cold water so they have a high rate of survival when caught and released in a certain way," said the professor. "This study provided us with a valid estimate of the impact on the fish."

The association was told that certain requirements would be placed on equipment to ensure the fish are not exposed to air alongside the boat and that fighting fish is not prolonged so they don't become exhausted.

It's expected a full catch and release could be on trial this year in major bluefin ports like North Lake and Alberton.

