

cruelty, with the intention of placing them in interstate commerce," but the Justices ruled 8-1 that the language was "overbroad." The Justices' concern centered on the fact that, as written, the law could theoretically apply to videos of hunting or animal slaughterhouses. This mirrored concerns by the National Rifle Association (NRA), which turned in a "friend of the court" brief (aka amicus brief) for the case. The U.S. government, which fought the case to uphold the law against 69-year old Robert Stevens who sold dogfighting videos, disagreed, as did several animal welfare organizations, including the [Humane Society of the United States](#) (HSUS) which also filed friend of the court briefs.



Credit: AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti

I found it interesting that the 1999 law had a real impact on reducing the sale of crush videos, which had proliferated in the late 1990s, but declined after they were made illegal. After the 2008 ruling, they once again started to sell. And now the Supreme Court ruling ensures the sadistic videos will continue to sell, until things change again.

HSUS senior attorney Kim Ockene told me that the animal stomping is only done to make crush videos, and the two are inseparable. The market feeds the animal abuse. The Supreme Court used that same line of reasoning to argue that child pornography should not be protected as free speech. So why not animal violence? Justice Stevens (not related to the defendant in the case) did hint that the ruling may not apply to a law specifically targeting crush videos.

As soon as the Court overturned the law (or more specifically, upheld the Third Circuit Court of Appeals finding in 2008 that ruled the law unconstitutional), new legislation was drafted by U.S. Representative Elton Gallegly (R-Calif.) - that very day. Elton had drafted the 1999 legislation as well. The new bill uses language to more clearly and specifically target crush videos, but still faces constitutional challenges.

What I want to know is, but which I was unable to find: if the video depicted humans being crushed, would the same standard apply? Apparently, [I'm not the only one](#) to ask that question.

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Top 10 Animal Stories of 2009

12/18/2009

In any given year, thousands of stories come and go, but these ten animal-related made waves in one way or another. I chose some of these because of their importance conservation-wise, such as the emerging disease known as white nose syndrome



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which has devastated bats. Others, like First Dog Bo Obama may not be critically important “news” but this Portuguese water dog received his share of public attention!

Most of these topics I have written about since I started the blog in April, but some of the events occurred before that. I’m sure most of these stories will find their way back into the public awareness in the future. Reviewing the list, I think perhaps the saddest part is that most of these are not ‘good news’ stories. Perhaps it’s the nature of news that what gets the most attention is the most tragic. Stay tuned for next week, though, when I will list the Top 10 stories of the decade; there are sure to be some more positive stories.



Gray wolves went from endangered to hunted in 2009/Credit US Fish & Wildlife Service

Gray wolves go from endangered to hunted

To many, wolves are symbols of all that is wild. And yet the U.S. has its fair share of wolf-haters. When the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service officially [de-listed the gray wolf](#) from the Endangered Species List in May, the news received two quite opposite reactions. Some hunters rejoiced, while conservationists decried the delisting as premature and appealed the decision in court. The Judge in the case has already suggested the decision will likely be reversed. Nevertheless, Montana and Idaho opened their borders for the [first gray wolf hunting season in decades](#). The entire Cottonwood wolf pack from Yellowstone National Park was killed within a week of opening wolf hunting, possibly lured across state lines from Wyoming – where they’re still protected – to Montana. The good news in this story is that these gorgeous animals have truly started recovering, and that is a wonderful thing.

Pet chimp brutally attacks owner



On February 17th, [Travis the chimp](#) shocked the world when this 200-pound pet viciously attacked a woman, tearing off half of her face and both her hands. Charla Nash is lucky to be alive. It all happened when the 15-year old chimp, a former television animal actor who the Herolds raised practically as their child, had escaped from the house. His owner, Sandra Herold, called Nash to come help her coax Travis back into the house. But when Nash got out of her car, the chimp attacked. No one knows what caused the chimp to freak out but Travis didn’t survive the incident; police shot him. Nash appeared on the Oprah show in November to

click on [Playing music with whales](#)

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show her face to the world and give hope to others with disfigurements and the [Nash Trust](#) has been established to help pay for her reconstructive surgery, since she had no health insurance.

Global warming makes oceans acidic

Global warming affects more than just polar ice and deserts. Warming also affects the ocean – which covers the majority of the planet. The marine ecosystem seems out of whack, from odd increases in number of [squid](#) off of San Diego to explosions in numbers of [giant jellyfish](#) in Japan. But the most frightening issue is that the increase in atmospheric carbon dioxide has caused oceans to become more acidic. This leaves shellfish such as [oysters](#), coral reefs, zooplankton – which form the base of the entire oceanic food chain – unable to build reefs, shells, or exoskeletons. In August, Oceana released a report, [Acid Test: Can We Save our Oceans from CO2?](#) and their Board member Sally-Christine Rodgers [urged the world](#) to do something about this underappreciated problem.

Michael Vick released from prison



The former star quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, [Michael Vick](#), was found guilty of financing an illegal dog fighting ring in 2007. He served 19 months in a federal penitentiary and was released this May. Before he went to prison, he paid \$1 million to care for the dogs that had previously been used in dogfighting. Now that he's served his sentence, he's trying to improve his image and gives talks on preventing animal cruelty around the nation, an effort sponsored by the Humane Society of the United States. In one of these talks, Vick said, "I should have known better. (Animals) have pains, they have feelings and they have emotions." The NFL lifted his suspension, and he got a new contract with the Philadelphia Eagles this year.

Dolphin slaughter in Japan

Ever since the documentary [The Cove](#) was shown at the Sundance Film Festival in January, the situation with the dolphin slaughter in Japan has been in the news. This story follows former *Flipper* trainer Ric O'Barry to Taiji, Japan where he goes undercover to film what happens every year in a private cove. When slaughter season rolled around in September, the world watched, and waited. At first, nothing happened. Then a small number of dolphins were captured but only for the aquarium trade. Later in the season, dolphins were killed but the film was shown at the Tokyo Film Festival, and changes are afoot with the increased global awareness of this situation. Meanwhile the film resulted in another positive change – the Japanese removed dolphin meat removed from school lunch menu due to research that revealed the meat's sky-high mercury levels.

Where does your meat come from?

A screenshot of the Animal Planet website. At the top, the Animal Planet logo is displayed in white and green on a dark background, with the website URL www.animalplanet.com below it. Below the logo is a dark grey bar with the word "ARCHIVES" in green. Underneath is a white search bar with the text "By Month" and a dropdown arrow on the right side.

Food animals have been all over the news this year. The story is how we, as a society, raise cows, chickens, and pigs – the big three meats we eat – not to mention eggs. Is it humane enough? Several prominent people consider the book [Eating Animals](#) by Jonathan Safran Foer a “game changer” as it lyrically and humorously describes one individual’s relationship to food, and particularly meat animals. It included his personal investigation into the conditions behind meat production, and his deliberations over whether to feed meat to his new son. Foer decided his answer was no. To him, the conditions were too inhumane and unhealthy. Not to mention, [meat production](#) is one of the world’s greatest contributors to global warming.

Bad economy has affected pets too

The economy’s decline has affected our furry friends, and their shelters. Most shelters across the nation have reached - or are near - full capacity since some people have to give up their pets to put food on the table. Compassionate folks have done innovative things, like opening a [pet soup kitchen](#) in Atlanta, and having a [animal shelter wedding](#) that helped raise funds for the animals there. [Animal murders](#) were in the news quite a bit for a while, too. Is this related to the floundering economy? Perhaps a result of desperation?

White Nose Syndrome devastates bats

One of the most important news stories of the year – and also the decade - involved the emergence and continued spread of the devastating white nose syndrome in bats. In 2009, scientists pinpointed a *Geomyces* fungus as most likely responsible for the deaths of hibernating bats across the northeast. This winter, as bats begin their hibernation, they’re dying in droves. Where it will spread over the winter is anyone’s guess.

The First Dog, Bo Obama



It was a year in which many people fell in love with the [Obama family’s new dog, Bo](#). A Portuguese water dog, Bo was adopted by the First Family in April, when he was six months old. Bo was a gift from the late Senator Ted Kennedy who owned several “porties.” The pup is named after the late singer Bo Diddley. Interest in Portuguese water dogs soared, even though the dogs are not necessarily the easiest to care for. Some animal activists weren’t too happy that the Obamas didn’t adopt a shelter dog.

Python hunt begins in the Everglades

Burmese pythons don’t belong in the Florida Everglades, but they’ve become a major nuisance there. Most likely, people who couldn’t handle their pet snakes let them go wild, and they started breeding. Florida started the innovative and successful amnesty program that allows pet owners to turn in illegal or exotic animal “no questions asked” a few years ago (and this year [Connecticut](#) started their own), and this year biologists

trained a [python posse](#) to track down and kill the snakes. While some oppose the hunt, most understand its necessity. The non-native pythons grow to massive sizes, wreak havoc on the treasured swamp ecosystem and even endanger young children; an escaped pet python killed a two-year old child in July, leading Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) to introduce a bill banning their importation.

Circus elephants maltreated

After their elephant trainers were [exposed](#) by secretly recorded video that aired around the world, Ringling Bros-Barnum & Bailey may never be viewed the same way by animal lovers. A PETA worker went undercover and videorecorded trainers beating and poking elephant babies and adults alike with sharp objects and whips. Biologists who study elephants know these highly intelligent and social animals require conditions akin to what humans need - space, companionship, kindness. And the pachyderms' treatment by the circus trainers seems to lack these basics.

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Fanged frog, giant rat, and more found in Papua New Guinea

10/29/2009

Last week I talked about the amazing animal discoveries in Asia's Mekong delta, and here's the other promised story about an amazing expedition to the "lost world" of Papua New Guinea's Bosavi volcano. Reading about these amazing trips makes me want to join a scientific expedition like this!

Between January and March of 2009, a team of biologists and filmmakers became the first Westerners to [explore](#) inside Papua New Guinea's remote Bosavi volcanic crater. The country lies on the east side of the large island of New Guinea, north of Australia. [George McGavin](#), an insect specialist and explorer who works as an honorary research associate with the Oxford University of Natural History and the University of Oxford Zoology Department, led the scientific team which also included Bishop Museum herpetologist [Allen Allison](#), ornithologist [Jack Dumbacher](#) from the California Academy of Sciences, ichthyologist [Phil Willink](#) from the Field Museum in Chicago, mammalogist [Kristofer Helgen](#) from the Smithsonian, bat specialist [Alanna Maltby](#) of the



A fanged frog ([Mantophryne sp](#)) discovered in Papua New Guinea's remote Bosavi volcano crater
Credit [Allen Allison](#)

Zoological Society of London, and [Muse Opiang](#) - the Papua New Guinean who did the first study of of [long-beaked echidnas](#) which I blogged about before, among others.

Because of the volcano's remote locale, the scientists had high hopes of finding unusual species there. The extinct volcano has high crater walls, so species with low mobility and species specializing in high elevation forest have remained isolated and hence evolved independently for hundreds of thousands of years. The expedition will appear in the BBC documentary series, [Lost Land of the Volcano](#) .

The expedition involved months of background prep for just a few weeks of collecting. On the initial trip to the village of Fogamaiyu, they met up with the Kasua tribe who live near the base of the volcano, who remain mostly isolated from Western civilization. They speak a dialect that fewer than 1,000 people speak, and had no televisions that might inform them about the outside world. The tribe didn't even have a cash economy, so explaining the concept of paying them so the team could set up a base camp near their village proved a challenge initially. The expedition team asked the tribe's permission to explore the volcano, which they received, and then hired several tribe members as trackers, medics, and boatmen, plus a cook.

The rest of the international expedition team members then flew in to Fogomaya by helicopter, which is still a four-day hike from the top. They trekked through dense rainforest to reach the summit of the nearly 9,000-foot Mount Bosavi volcano, which lucky for them is no longer active, and then ventured down into it. Once they reached the top, the hard work paid off. The scientists found a "lost world" with up to 40 funky, strange species that seem to be totally new to science, including 16 frog, one gecko, three fish, one bat and 20 insects and spiders. The scientists still must go through the peer review process to ensure these are indeed new species, so many of their scientific names have not yet been assigned.

Some of the critters discovered include the vegetarian, cat-sized rodent that Helgen has named the "Bosavi giant woolly rat" – one of the largest rats known in the world. It showed no fear of humans. The team also found a new subspecies of tree-dwelling silky cuscus (*Phalanger sericeus*) – a marsupial that looks like a gray teddy bear with very small ears – plus a tree kangaroo, a pigmy parrot no larger than one's hand, a fanged frog and the Henamo Grunter - a fish that grunts using its swim bladder. You can watch a video of the giant rat [here](#). Amazing stuff! What do you think? Do you dream of going on an expedition like this? Or do you prefer to stay home and read about or watch others doing this stuff?

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Hydraulic fracturing or "fracking" may kill animals

10/16/2009

Hydraulic fracturing, or "[fracking](#)" as it's often called, is a process used to drill for natural gas. Because natural gas occurs in bubbles within tight spaces such as shale bedrock, natural gas companies inject water filled with chemicals far and deep into the rock, fracturing it, which allows them to gather up the natural gas.

After many years of secrecy and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) denial that fracking



posed any threat to people, wildlife, and water, in late August the EPA released a report suggesting well water in Wyoming contaminated with methane, lead, copper, and hydrocarbons [could indeed be from hydraulic fracturing](#). Wyoming's not alone. Drilling occurs in 31 states, including [Texas](#), [New Mexico](#), Louisiana, [Pennsylvania](#), and [Colorado](#), and besides the lack of federal regulations, 21 of these have no state regulations.



*A hydraulic fracturing drill rig in Wyoming
Credit [Abrahm Lustgarten/ProPublica](#)*

Reports of dead and tumored cattle, deer, chipmunks, and other wildlife near fracturing sites have surfaced in various locales - not to mention links to human health problems. On September 16th, 8,000 gallons of frack fluid leaked into Stevens Creek near [Dimock](#), Pennsylvania, causing minnows, salamanders and tadpoles to swim erratically and die. Cabot Oil & Gas was responsible for three frac gel spills within a few weeks time, and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is investigating. Yet some environmental groups don't think DEP is doing enough.

Even more tragic, on the border between West Virginia and Pennsylvania, much of the entire 38-miles of [Dunkard Creek](#) ecosystem has [died](#) in a very short time in mid-September - and officials suspect fracking fluid is to blame. The dead and dying include over 10,000 fish, plus salamanders, frogs, crayfish, aquatic insects and freshwater mussels, including two candidates for being listed as endangered species - the salamander mussel and the snuffbox mussel. Biologists observing the site have called it the worst environmental disaster of their lifetime. At first, authorities blamed coal mining waste, but testing found chemicals in the water known to be used by fracking in the nearby Marcellus Shale gas well drilling operations. It's now being treated as a crime scene, since someone may have illegally dumped fracking fluid rather than treating the chemicals.

Outrage against the secrecy over just what chemicals these companies engaged in fracking are pumping into groundwater has started bubbling over. In [Split Estate](#), a documentary airing tomorrow night, October 17th, on [Planet Green](#) about the conflict between surface landowners and the companies extracting oil and gas - including the secretive history of hydraulic fracturing - EPA whistleblower Weston Wilson says, "We cannot know what the industry injects in our land. It is exempt from being reported."

Wilson blew the whistle on the original EPA study, completed during the Bush administration, which claimed fracking caused little or no harm to drinking water because the chemicals are diluted in billions of gallons of water. Oil and gas companies doing hydraulic fracturing have been exempt from complying with the Safe Drinking Water Act since 2005, and also from reporting any chemicals that may end up in surface runoff which is normally covered by the Clean Water Act. As Weston, said natural gas companies need not even disclose what chemicals they use - so citizens have no idea what may seep into their drinking water. While other industries have to list chemicals they used, Dick Cheney got an exemption for fracking. During the early days of Cheney's Vice Presidency, this former Halliburton CEO successfully pressured then-EPA-head Christine Todd Whitman to exempt fracking. In addition, companies can protect the chemical lists used as trade secrets. Suffice it to say fracking fluid contains many of them.

In his report to Congress, Weston wrote, "EPA's conclusions are unsupportable... EPA decisions were supported by a Peer Review Panel; however five of the seven members of this panel appear to have conflicts-of-interest and may benefit from EPA's decision not to conduct further investigation or impose

regulatory conditions.”

A new bill - [the FRAC Act](#) - is making its way through Congress (S1215 and HR 2766) to close the 'Halliburton loophole' in the Safe Drinking Water Act, which allows companies to inject chemicals unchecked into groundwater supplies. On top of the chemical contaminants, billions of gallons of water gets pumped into the ground for this process. That's a lot of water when the precious liquid is being fought for, sold, preserved and conserved in drought-weary, water-starved regions in the U.S. I found the "Reporter's Notebook" video by ProPublica's [Abraham Lustgarten](#), which I embedded below, to be very well-done and informative (and I've linked to several of his stories above).

Don't forget to check out [Split Estate](#) on Planet Green!

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The Cove eco-thriller documentary makes a difference for dolphins

10/02/2009

Every September, the seas off of

Japan's western shores near the quaint seaside village of Taiji turn red with the blood of dolphins. In a long-time tradition, Japanese fishermen bang on poles to scare dolphins into a small cove. Then they spear them to death. Thousands of bottlenosed, striped, spotted, and Risso's dolphins get killed near Taiji's cove every season, as well as many false killer whales and short-finned pilot whales. The meat gets sold, though a handful of others get captured alive and sold to dolphin trainers and aquariums.



Japanese fishermen lure dolphins into a secluded cove to kill them/Copyright (c) Oceanic Preservation Society

The Japanese town of Taiji became international news after an eco-thriller documentary named [The Cove](#) was released this summer by [Oceanic Preservation Society](#) (OPS) Productions. Before this, who, outside of a select few, had ever heard of the slaughter of thousands of dolphins in Japan?

The documentary stars [Ric O'Barry](#), a former dolphin trainer who worked with the five dolphins that played Flipper on the popular 1960s TV show. The show became so popular it led to what is now a \$2 billion dolphins and marine mammal entertainment industry. O'Barry's view on captive dolphins changed after one of the Flipper dolphins "committed suicide" in his arms by closing her blowhole in order to drown. Soon after that, he went to Bimini and let a captive dolphin go, leading to his first arrest. O'Barry now actively campaigns against any use of dolphins in captivity. When he became aware of the dolphin slaughter in Taiji, he felt he had to do something. Some of his original footage caught the attention of former National Geographic photographer and co-founder of OPS, Louie Psihoyos, who directed the documentary.

The film captures stunning – and secretly filmed – shots of the dolphin slaughter, as well as beautiful shots of them in their oceanic environment. Prevented from filming legally by Japanese authorities, the crew – which included freedivers, electronics experts, and even pirates – snuck into the cove which is protected by steep cliffs on three sides. They donned night vision goggles, employed military grade thermal cameras, hid in camouflaged blinds, and used fake rocks to hide microphones – evading fishermen and authorities all the while. The high drama of the film is part of its appeal, not to mention its beautiful cinematography.

After being screened at several film festivals, the documentary has gotten much media play and won several film festival awards. Beyond that, it has begun making a difference for the dolphins. On September 1st, the world watched and waited to see whether the dolphin slaughter would begin. For the first time ever, fishermen did not begin their annual dolphin slaughter on the first day of the season. A few days later, though, fishermen lured around 100 dolphins and pilot whales into the Cove. But in a surprising move, perhaps because of the international attention, the fishermen opted only to capture the dolphins for the aquarium trade but not to kill any dolphins – though they did kill pilot whales. They even set around 70 of those dolphins free.

O'Barry disagrees with any capture of the dolphins and says they're kept in tanks far too small for animals used to swimming up to 40 miles per day on the open ocean. The fishermen get up to \$150,000 for each live

dolphin sold but only \$600 for dead dolphins sold as meat. I am not sure why they don't catch more for aquaria but I suspect it has to do with demand since only so many aquaria exist around the world.

In more positive news, the [Tokyo International Film Festival](#), which opens October 17th, decided to screen *The Cove* in such a last minute decision that the movie information didn't even make it into the main brochure. And it was just announced the film will be dubbed in Japanese for the festival rather than subtitled.

Most Japanese are completely unaware of the dolphin slaughter. They also may not even be aware they're eating dolphin meat since it's sometimes sold as other things, such as "whale meat." Dolphin meat has dangerously high levels of mercury, more toxic than even Japanese health standards allow, according to whale biologist and DNA expert [Scott Baker](#), a professor at Oregon State University who consulted on the film. Japanese schools used to serve dolphin meat as part of the lunch program, but that stopped this year, in part due to the work of OPS experts. "Our contribution was to identify the true species source of the dolphin meat which is otherwise incompletely and sometimes erroneously labeled," says Baker. "I think the molecular monitoring of the whalemeat markets has helped to raise international awareness of the diversity of species taken in this hunt and the extent of the mercury contamination - not just in Taiji."

I have been intrigued by the story of *The Cove* for a while now, and find it very exciting when eye-opening media edutainment presented to the broader public makes such an immediate difference to the subject - in this case, Japan's dolphins. The big question will be whether it will create lasting change, or whether the dolphins will get only a temporary reprieve while international attention stays focused on them.

Shooting wetland documentary helps teens go green

09/03/2009

Even though this is a local story, I loved it because it shows how when you put teenagers together with technology, it can excite them about a topic that they may otherwise find boring. In this case – Houston’s disappearing wetlands.

Ten teens from [Hightower High School](#) in Missouri City, a suburb of Houston, Texas in the Fort Bend Independent School District, directed, filmed, and then publicly premiered a 30-minute documentary called "Teens for Green" that focused on the importance of and the deteriorating status of wetlands in the Houston area. The documentary can be viewed [here](#).

What captured me was how it seems like these are not your typical “tree hugger” type students but students who actually learned about the subject as they shot it, and for some, it made them more environmentally conscious - as this [news clip](#) from KPRC

Channel 2 Houston shows. Under the guidance of teacher Ted Irving, the junior-level students in the high school’s Electronic Media Academy – a career academy that students earn partial college credit for – got experience in front of and behind the camera, and filming brought the students outdoors, up close and personal with alligators, great blue herons, egrets, snapping turtles, snakes, ducks, frogs, not to mention mucky mud and lots of standing water. I asked Irving whether my perceptions of the kids were accurate.

“The kids are definitely not tree huggers,” says Irving. “These are suburban kids living the suburban life. However, the areas they live in are wetland areas, but they never recognized it until we began production. But by mid-way into the project you could see they were acquiring vast amounts of information about their surrounding and recognizing that the area they lived in was in danger of deforestation, pollution and wetland destruction.”

The Academy had received a Captain Planet Foundation Grant plus a Teach Award from Best Buy’s program which helps schools integrate technology into classrooms. Though the Academy has over 130 students, only the ten filmed this particular documentary, which they premiered on July 31st at the Angelika Theatre. Irving came up with the wetlands concept several years ago, wanting to work more on documentary production,



Hightower High School Electronic Media Academy students filming a documentary about Houston's disappearing wetlands. Credit Ted Irving

which was relatively new for the Academy. They turned it from “boring” to “cool” using music, humor, and fun video editing.

Houston sits at the crossroads of piney woods forest, prairie and marshland, all three of which have their own wetlands. Much of the wetland habitat in Houston has disappeared from development over the past century. They play a critical role in filtering pollutants out of water, providing wildlife habitat, and in helping mitigate flood damage as water can sit still rather than pouring off into storm drains and out into swollen creeks and rivers, as it does off of concrete. Nationally, wetland acreage [started to increase](#) between 1998 and 2004 for the first time since data has been recorded according to the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service](#), but most of the net gain is due to artificially created wetlands while natural wetlands continue to be filled in and destroyed. Texas wetlands have declined by 47% over the past 50 years.

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'Tragedy of the commons' dooms Northern bluefin

08/14/2009

It's a classic case of tragedy of the commons. The once abundant Northern bluefin tuna (*Thunnus thynnus*), which lives throughout the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, is plummeting in a freefall towards extinction. Since no country owns the high seas, nothing protects the bluefin. Insatiable appetite for tuna sushi, most pronounced in Japan but truly throughout the world, has led to its abrupt decline. Scientists and conservationists predict functional extinction, meaning that the breeding population won't be able to keep up with commercial fishing rates, by 2012 – just three years away. The average size of mature tuna has halved since the 1990s, down from 124 kg to 60 kg in 2008.

Yet the harvest continues unabated.

For years, the Madrid-based [International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas \(ICCAT\)](#) – what some sarcastically call the “International Conspiracy to Catch All Tuna” – have set catch quotas higher than even their own scientists advise. This year, ICCAT scientists advised a bluefin catch quota of 8,500-15,000 tons, but in defiance of their own scientists, they set the quota at 22,000 tons. The [IUCN Red List](#) lists the species as “data deficient,” but Greenpeace



fish campaigner Willie Mackenzie says bluefin tuna are as endangered as tigers or rhinos. Nevertheless, the bluefin tuna season opened, business as usual, in April.



[France recently helped lead the way to save threatened Northern bluefin tuna](#). Joining Monaco, President Nicolas Sarkozy formally supported a ban on international trade on the declining species under CITES – the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora. Sarkozy spoke of his support for a trade ban at a national stakeholder consultation meeting over the future of France’s sustainable fisheries and maritime policy. He said, “Ours is the last generation with the ability to take action before it’s too late – we must protect marine resources now, in order to fish better in future. We owe this to fishermen, and we owe it to future generations.”

Northern Bluefin Tuna populations are in a freefall, but still actively overfished and sold without much regulation/Credit NOAA

The announcement was interesting because France’s fishing fleet has traditionally caught more bluefin than other Mediterranean countries. Some questioned whether the US and Britain would respond in kind, and days later, British fisheries minister Huw Irranca Davies followed suit. Now pressure’s on the U.S.. World Wildlife Fund (WWF) thinks a CITES ban would help, but is not enough. The nonprofit has called for an immediate halt to the Mediterranean fisheries to allow the species to recover, and at the same time, continues to encourage restaurants and consumers to stop selling and eating bluefin tuna.

Two other bluefin species exist, including the Pacific and Southern bluefin tuna. IUCN Red List lists the Southern bluefin as critically endangered, and its population has declined by 92% since the 1950s, but fishing continues though at slightly reduced rates. IUCN also lists Pacific bluefin as data deficient, but experts agree the species is also overfished. All bluefin gets sold as sushi and as tuna steak, but is not the same tuna found in cans (for the record, albacore stocks are faring well, but yellowfin and skipjack are found in most canned tuna fish use questionable fishing practices that catch a lot of unwanted bycatch – including dolphins, whales, sharks, and sea turtles).

Britain’s Independent newspaper ran a story recently about Mitsubishi, which owns 35 to 40% of the bluefin tuna market, stocking and freezing tuna - [Revealed: The bid to corner the world's bluefin market](#). The company claims this freezing just helps them deal with natural ups and downs in population cycles so they can provide year-round supply to consumers, but some believe they could stockpile it for years when bluefin is nearly extinct and could sell the fish for astronomical sums. Tokyo has many premium fish markets that sell bluefin tuna to people and sushi restaurants alike.

In a chilling statement on their blog, the producers of [The End of the Line](#) wrote, “As we were making the film, *The End of the Line*, in the Mediterranean we were uncomfortably aware that we could be filming the last round up of a species, like the American bison or the blue whale before it. Now we know we were.” The documentary, released in the UK in June and with select screenings across the U.S. throughout the summer, has brought attention to the plight of bluefin tuna and other fisheries stocks.

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Shark attack survivors want conservation

08/03/2009

If sharks were really awful, Jaws-like monsters of the sea, you'd think those once bitten would be twice shy, wanting to rid the world of the toothy fish. Not these shark attack survivors! Nine men and women who were bitten, attacked, and lost limb and almost life gathered together in Washington in mid-July to asking Congress to pass legislation that would give stronger protection for sharks, the [Shark Protection Act of 2009](#) (S. 850/H.R. 81).

"The media makes sharks out to be monsters, some people make them out to be huggable little creatures, but neither is completely true," said shark attack victim Al Brenneka in a press release put out by [The Pew Environment Group](#). Brenneka lost his arm to a lemon shark bite in 1976 while surfing in Florida. "Sharks are wild animals that deserve our respect, not our retribution."

It may seem counterintuitive, but those bitten by sharks often become their fiercest advocates. Shark bite survivor and Pew Trust communications manager Debbie Salamone, led the charge to storm Washington with their shark conservation message. After being bitten on her foot by a shark off Cape Canaveral National Seashore Florida in 2004, Salamone left her job at a newspaper where she'd worked for the past 21 years, and although it took her a couple of years to emotionally recover her passion for the environment and the ocean, she now devotes her life to saving sharks and other marine life.

The shark bite severed Salamone's achilles tendon and tore her heel loose. "Horrible for my hobby: competitive ballroom dancing. But now I do acupuncture and laser treatments to keep my feet fit for the dance floor." Pretty amazing recovery! This year, she contacted other shark attack survivors to bring their cause to Washington. Though some refused, several signed on to help.

Mike DeGruy was one of those who joined Salamone in Washington (see him talk about shark finning on the [Rachel Maddow Show](#) [here](#)). Film-maker and TV personality DeGruy was one of those I met on board the Undersea Explorer last April, along with shark biologist and film maker [Richard Fitzpatrick](#), when I spent ten



Nine shark attack survivors gather in Washington to lobby for stronger shark conservation/

AP Photo/William B. Plowman for Pew Environment

days diving with sharks at Osprey Reef off Australia's east coast [blogging Expedition Shark](#), while they filmed [Mysteries of the Shark Coast](#) (I'm the blonde "shark nurse" wearing braids handing Fitzpatrick tools while he does surgery on the sharks, and in the very wee background on and off throughout. But I digress...).

The first day I met DeGruy, I noticed his arm had some scarring on it, and I asked what had happened, joking that I bet it was a shark bite. Turns out, I was right. He had been bitten by a shark while diving near Enewetak Atoll in the Marshall Islands many years before. When I asked what species, he said I didn't want to know... because it was the same species I would spend the next several days diving with, grey reef sharks. Fortunately, none showed any interest in me and the experience became one of the most profound of my life. I have a renewed respect for these beautiful apex predators.

The reality is, shark attacks are exceedingly rare. Sharks are not "man eaters" but when we swim in their traditional feeding grounds, we may confuse them. Some behaviors, like fishing with bloody chum while standing in the surf, may increase the chance a shark takes a bite out of a limb. The chance of getting bitten by a shark is low, only 1 in every 11.5 million beach visits, according to the [International Shark Attack file](#). Every year, sharks bite an average of 50 to 70 people, with only a handful dying as a result. Yet tragically, people kill at least 73 million sharks yearly, many through the wasteful and inhumane act of finning; fishermen slice off their fins, and toss the shark overboard, still alive, to die a slow death. Asians buy shark fins for traditional shark fin soup, and since fins sell for far more than shark meat, it is more lucrative for fishermen to use space on their boat only for the fins, tossing the shark overboard. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) just [reported the results](#) from the first comprehensive survey of open ocean, or pelagic, shark and ray species, and found a staggering third of all open ocean shark and ray species face extinction, mainly from overfishing.

The bill, introduced by Senator John Kerry (D-Mass), would pass stronger protection against shark finning in U.S. waters. It unanimously passed through the House of Representatives in April. To lend your voice of support to the bill, contact your Senator!

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