

PROTECTION OF MARINE LIFE

Mexico has ambitious programs aimed at protecting certain endangered species, the most important being dolphin and sea turtles. These programs have been fostered by consumer boycotts and a ban on the import of Mexican tuna into the United States.

The United States suspended tuna imports from Mexico and ten other countries in 1991 when it passed the Mammal Protection Law. This was in response to complaints from environmentalist organizations that certain Pacific Rim countries were not taking adequate precautions to reduce dolphin mortality. In particular, it was claimed at the time that Mexico's tuna fishery had one of the world's worst records of dolphin mortality. A General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) panel ruled that it was an unfair trade practice for the US to apply its own environmental standards to another country. But the issue has been complicated by the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and suits against the American government by environmental groups.

The Mexican viewpoint on this issue is that dolphin mortality in Mexico has been reduced to world levels and that the continued embargo amounts to a non-tariff trade barrier. Fishing industry experts say that Mexican tuna exports have fallen by US \$150 million per year as a result of the boycott, at the cost of about 30,000 jobs.

According to the Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission, dolphin mortality has dropped 96 percent over the past ten years. International environmental groups, including Greenpeace, are now advocating the removal of the ban, which also applies to Venezuela, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama, as well as five other countries. A bill which was to have lifted the embargo failed to pass the US Senate before Congress adjourned for the year in September 1996. Opponents of the bill expressed concern that the affected countries would return to previous practices, putting the American tuna fleet at a competitive disadvantage.

A related issue is consumer boycotts of Mexican shrimp in the US because of incidental turtle capture by the shrimp fishery. Again, Mexico claims to have remedied the problem, but the boycott continues. Environmentalists in the US say that their concerns are related to Mexico's alleged over-exploitation of various species, and not just the specific issues of dolphin and turtle mortality.

Depletion of fish stocks has also been an issue in the sport fishing sector, which has long been a major tourist attraction. In particular, billfish populations in the Baja California area have been falling.