

'Red Gold': The High Price Tuna Pay for Being Tasty

By [Marc Bekoff, Psychology Today / Animal Emotions](#)

February 2021

Why the global regulation of tuna is driving them to extinction.

"Engaging and well-argued, *Red Gold* is an exemplary documentation of how bad-faith science conducted at the behest of corporate interests provides cover for the over-exploitation of 'natural resources.'" – [Daniel Pauly](#)

When I read *Red Gold: The Managed Extinction of the Giant Bluefin Tuna* by [Dr. Jennifer E. Telesca](#), assistant professor of environmental justice in the Department of Social Science and Cultural Studies at Pratt Institute, my learning curve was vertical.¹

I thoroughly agreed with all of the strong endorsements, especially perhaps with the praise offered by NYU professor Dale Jamieson. [As he aptly put it](#), "Jennifer E. Telesca's wide-ranging study of the giant bluefin tuna challenges many deeply held dogmas. We overfish because of the tragedy of the commons and think the solution is regulation. But Telesca argues that we are regulating our way to extinction. The tragedy is not of the commons, but of commodification. The drive to extinction will not stop until we value these animals as fellow travelers on this planet, rather than as resources from whom we can extract value."

Jennifer's book touches on a number of different but overlapping topics ranging from the inner cognitive and emotional lives of highly sentient tuna—[they're far more than merely streams of edible protein](#)—to the ecological devastation resulting from "managed extinction," and I'm pleased to offer an interview with her about her landmark book.² Here's what she had to say.

Why did you write *Red Gold*?

All creatures are extraordinary, if only people took the time to get to know them. Look at the bluefin: one of the fastest fish at sea, traversing the open ocean with mates capable of weighing a ton, cruising in packs like stampeding horses in endless motion. Unlike the typical fish, the bluefin is warm-blooded—that's why her flesh is red. With an exceptionally large heart, she swims explosively up and down the water column, glinting, encountering dark, chilly places people will never know. A bluefin can dart from the shores of North America all the way to the Strait of Gibraltar, the gateway to the Mediterranean, in less than 40 days. Yet the vast majority of sushi lovers are detached from the food they eat.

Even the informed might only know how threatened by extinction she is, or that her flesh sells for a spectacular price. In January 2019, one of her Pacific cousins weighing 613 pounds (278 kilos) sold at auction at Tokyo's Tsukiji market for a record USD\$3.1 million. (Hence, "red gold.") I wrote the book to jolt the reader into seeing what a twisted paradox fisheries [management](#) in the name of marine conservation is. Even the experts best positioned to sing her praises must deny or disavow the bluefin's majesty for them to carry on the work of global trade.

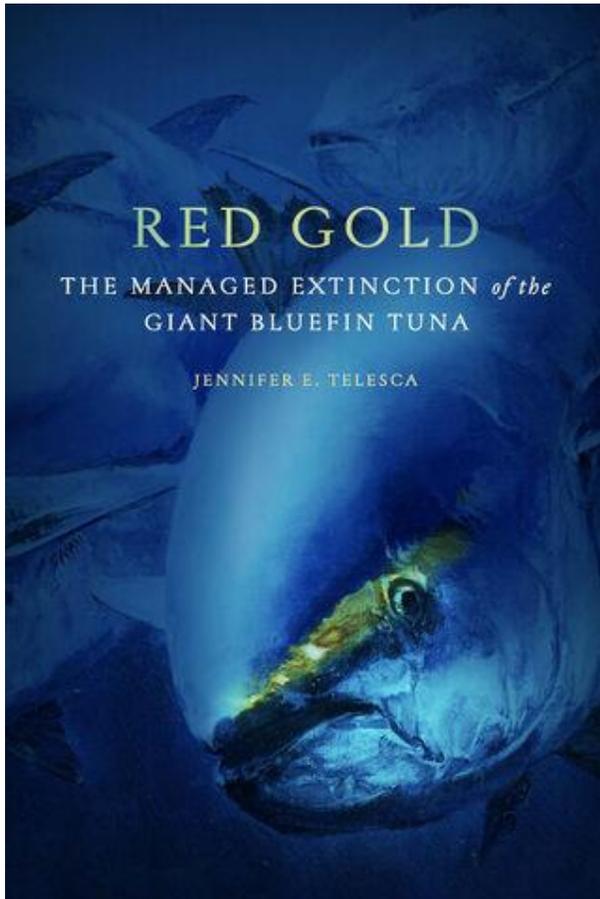
How does your book relate to your background and general areas of interest?

The ocean is home to me. I know Montauk and Shinnecock Inlets on Eastern Long Island in New York State best. As a child, I walked the docks in summer there with my family to inspect the fantastical treasures drawn up from the deep sea: the sleek mako sharks with sandpaper skin, the sworded fish with thick bellies, the tear-dropped bodies of the giant bluefin tuna. In the 1970s, sea creatures appeared large

'Red Gold': The High Price Tuna Pay for Being Tasty

Page 2 of 4

and plentiful to me. I have seen the ocean degrade catastrophically before my eyes. *Red Gold* is my effort to understand what officials in positions of power were doing—or not doing—to protect my home and the beings living there.



Source: Jennifer Telesca, used with permission

Who is your intended audience?

I hope the book speaks to any steward of the sea—whether ordinary citizen, coast dweller, handler, fisher, teacher, student, journalist, policymaker, environmentalist, lawyer, or scientific expert in fish.

What are some of the topics you weave into the text and what are some of your major messages?

Red Gold provides profound insight into the world's foremost organization for managing the catch of tunas, seabirds, turtles, and sharks traversing international waters. It is called "[The International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas](#)" (ICCAT), established a half-century ago. In the field I found that ICCAT did not even protect its celebrity fish to ensure the integrity of the cosystem.³ Instead, I found that ICCAT has faithfully executed the task assigned it by international law: to fish as hard as possible to grow national economies. Under the mandate to secure export markets, by appraising

'Red Gold': The High Price Tuna Pay for Being Tasty

Page 3 of 4

sea creatures as prestige goods, member states have become complicit in extermination for sea power. The rapid loss of big fish is not a tragedy of the commons but [a tragedy of the commodified](#). A human-centric worldview that imagines fish purposed for elite consumption fatally lies at the foundations of the laws and institutions designed to conserve our seas. This speciesist worldview—the idea that humankind represents the apex of a hierarchy of value (prevalent especially among the most privileged)—has shown its limits. The [threat of mass extinction](#) is real. If we don't want to regulate our way to a ghostly ocean bereft of fish, then these marginalized beings—who are our kin—[must be respected and revered](#).

How does your book differ from others that are concerned with some of the same general topics?

Red Gold is a [multispecies ethnography](#) of a treaty body rarely seen from the inside. Access to diplomatic zones is notoriously difficult for anthropologists to obtain. My status as a non-aligned observer was hard-won. For three years, I was on the ground attending ICCAT meetings like any delegate would. I spent another two conducting follow-up interviews. I consulted legal documents and stories of ICCAT in the news. I mixed methods as well as disciplines.

Anthropology is my anchor, but other ways of knowing were necessary to unpack the complexity of managed extinction. I employed geography, international relations, rhetoric, science and technology studies, and socio-legal studies. This approach allowed me to produce a critical and genuinely rounded portrayal of ocean governance. Over time, I came to understand that institutional power thrives by rationalizing the domination of vulnerable beings, including sea creatures, when short-term profit for commodity empires orders the day. *Red Gold* shows in meticulous detail how international fisheries management acts as an agent of mass extinction.

Are you hopeful things can change for the better for these magnificent animals as people learn about them?

Every semester, I welcome young people into the classroom. Without fail, my students transform when they open themselves up to the mystery of worlds unfamiliar to them. They come alive, knowing that nonhuman animals aren't machines who merely eat, mate, defecate, and die. Fish are not first and foremost "stocks" for sale, nor are they commodities passively awaiting consumption. Nor are fish to be "saved" like money compounding interest in a bank account. They are co-creators in this life. They have social lives. They are not only in the world. They possess awareness of it.

The inability or unwillingness to venerate our fellow beings, so prevalent in the dominant culture, lies at the root of our ecological crisis. Only when decision-makers honestly reckon with schemes of predation will they be able to implement meaningful, structural change on a scale commensurate with mass extinction. This requires that we as individuals recognize we are not isolated units whose solidarity magically appears under the direction of the invisible hand of the market. The widespread [anxiety](#) provoked by the specter of ecological collapse shows that new worlds are seeking to impress themselves. Which worlds will emerge from the ruin and become widespread will depend on each of us learning to organize, debate, come together, become curious, practice humility, admit wrongs, and demand of our leaders respect for the interdependency of life.

'Red Gold': The High Price Tuna Pay for Being Tasty

Page 4 of 4

Is there anything else you'd like to tell readers?

“Stock.” “Resource.” “Product.” How people use language when talking, writing, teaching, researching, making policy, and legally determining the fate of the ocean is important. Words are windows into how we relate to one another. This is why I use the pronoun “she” when referring to the bluefin, however imperfect this tactic may be. Surely a fellow being indispensable to webs of life cannot be an “it.” In practice, simple shifts in word choice are surprisingly difficult to adopt. Still, they can be one small step in instilling a [mindful ethic of care](#) through which we might heal a broken world.