

Fishing out the Banc d'Arguin



AS THE SUN SET over the Atlantic, Italie de Silva worked fast: gutting the sharks, rays and guitar fish, cutting off their fins and laying out the flesh to be salted by the incoming tide. It was a good catch, he said. Good for these days, anyway. There were maybe 100 fish, worth in all perhaps US\$1 000, brought back after two days at sea.

But as he slit the bellies of the female sharks, fetuses spilled out. The fishermen were, in effect, killing many fish for the meat and fins of just one. Those fetuses should have been next year's catch.

This scene, on the beach by the tiny village of Iwik in the Banc d'Arguin, a giant national park in the West African state of Mauritania, summed up the crisis in one of the world's richest fishing grounds. The park's mudflats and islands stretch for about 100 kilometers into the Atlantic, just at the point where a cold ocean current, rich in nutrients, reaches the surface. The rush of nutrients and the shallow waters warmed by the sun make this an immensely productive marine ecosystem.

The Banc is West Africa's biggest fish spawning and feeding area. And with the fish come fishing boats. Not just the few dozen from the park's villages – who are allowed to fish as long as they use sails rather than outboard motors – but also thousands of motorized fishing boats, called pirogues, sailing from as far away as Senegal and Gambia. And, worst of all, the riches of the Banc draw hundreds of huge trawlers from Europe's oversized and underemployed fishing fleets.

Foreign vessels take more than half a million tons of fish from Mauritanian waters each year. Among the vessels cruising just beyond the park's boundary is one of the world's largest fishing vessels, the Irish-owned *Atlantic Dawn*, which is 144 meters long, has a crew of 60, and can hold 7 000 tons of fish.

From these waters, the fins of sharks and rays are sold to Asia, shrimps to Spain, mullet roe to Italy and France, octopus to Japan, shark meat to half of Africa and almost anything to Dutch fishmeal factories, from where it feeds European livestock. A similar fish-rush extends down the coast through the rich waters of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau.

But it cannot go on. These poor coastal nations are sacrificing their long-term prosperity by allowing European fishing fleets to catch their fish at rock-bottom prices, says the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). In a study of the impact of free trade on the environment, it says they are forfeiting the future health of fish stocks worth billions of dollars and the incomes of their own fishers in return for paltry short-term financial gains.

And the situation is worsening daily as rich nations send their surplus fleets to foreign waters, where they drive local fishing communities into ever greater poverty, as well as robbing the marine environment. The report concludes that the European Union's fishing of West African waters over the past decade has had a devastating effect on some key fish stocks and resulted in "a serious impact on local food supplies". Two thirds of Senegal's export revenues come from fish exports to Europe. And the EU for one is pushing for more.

Conservationists have sought to safeguard the region's fisheries by protecting the Banc d'Arguin breeding grounds. Luc Hoffmann, environmental *éminence grise* and founding president of the park, says: "For centuries the local fishers lived in harmony with the natural resources. But today the park faces a huge challenge."

Even within the park, the signs of overfishing are obvious to all. "In the old days we could see the mullet coming," says Mohammed oud Swidi, chief of Iwik village. "We just walked into the water with our nets to catch them." Not any more. Not since the rest of the world got wise to the riches here.

Dimas Santos, who exports fresh Mauritanian grouper, bream and hake to European restaurants, looks gloomy in his packing plant behind the beach at Nouakchott, the Mauritanian capital. "The fish just aren't in the sea any more. I can only buy half of what I could get two years ago. We are paying the price for years of overfishing," he says.

Nobody can doubt the importance of the fishing grounds to locals. On Hann beach outside the Senegalese capital of Dakar, more than a thousand motorized pirogues are lined up daily. According to veteran fisherman Bira Gueye, 30 years ago "there were just five boats here". Until perhaps a decade ago, they could be at rich fishing grounds within half an hour. Today it takes four hours. And many Senegalese fishers travel the 600 kilometers to the Banc d'Arguin.

Such fishers often get the blame for declining fish stocks. But in Mauritanian waters foreign boats take 30 times more fish than locals. Callum Roberts of York University, one of the world's leading experts on marine reserves, says: "Foreign trawlers are strip-mining African waters of their fisheries resources. It is a scandal." Western countries, he says, "have signed up to international treaties that promise sustainable fishing. But having failed to do it at home, they are wrecking the future of African fisheries."

What is to be done? The UNEP report, in a detailed case study of Senegal, recommends that governments here should charge foreign vessels more for access to its fish and "suspend fishing in cases where a stock is seriously depleted".

The fish, says Pierre Campredon, a French marine biologist who advises the Mauritanian government, would be best protected by the locals. He believes that if they can get rights to a greater share of the catch, it may give them the long-term interest needed to manage the fisheries better. "They are the key figures, the primary managers of ecosystems and their resources. It is only by working with them and helping to address their concerns that we will be able to better manage the coastal zone," he says.

Article by Fred Pearce

Additional sources

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