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The battle for West Africa's fish



As the European Commission (EC) negotiates to strike a major new fisheries agreement with the West African state of Mauritania, Tim Judah examines the strain this places on the region's own fishing stocks.

An agreement to let industrial fishing boats from European Union (EU) countries fish in Mauritanian waters sounds routine enough, but with demand for fish increasing across the world, fishing rights have become a valuable commodity.

Over the last few weeks, the EC has renewed fishing agreements with Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde.

However, it has failed to strike a new deal with Senegal and has had to make do with a temporary agreement that allows EU fishing vessels to remain in Senegalese waters until



West Africa has to choose

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the end of the year. between short-term cash and
long-term fish

These fishing deals give the African states valuable financial compensation in exchange for fishing rights for European vessels, which, in this region, come mostly from Spain and Portugal, but also from Italy, Holland, France, Greece and other EU countries.

The problem is that stocks in these rich fishing grounds are plummeting. But the Europeans need to access more than ever now because most of Europe's own waters are already overfished.

Agonising choice

In West Africa, governments have to balance their need for foreign exchange earnings with the need to safeguard stocks, not only for the future but also to help feed their own people today.

Morocco, which has far more political clout than its weaker southern neighbours, has failed to reach a new accord with the EC. It also controls the rich waters of Western Sahara - a territory it occupied in 1975.

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Its last four-year deal with the EU was worth £500m but since it lapsed at the end of November 1999, EU fishing boats have been excluded from its waters.

European fishermen who used to fish there are desperate to remain in the waters of the other West African states, and hope the EC's negotiators can increase their access there.

But, there will not be room enough for all of them.

International competitors

Two weeks ago, the EC proposed a £197m aid package for 4,300 Spanish and Portuguese

fishermen who have lost their livelihoods due to the failure of the EC to reach a new accord with Morocco.

Ships from the EU are not the only foreign industrial trawlers operating in this region. Russians, Chinese, Taiwanese and Koreans are also here.

They are not only in competition among themselves but also with thousands of motorised African pirogues, modern-day descendants of the old fishing canoes.

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Across the world, demand for fish and fish products has increased dramatically over the last few decades

Rising demand

According to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), demand for fish has risen at twice the rate of human population growth since 1961.

World fishery production is now more than six times that of 1950, and with Britain, and to a lesser extent the rest of Europe, rocked by BSE and foot-and-mouth disease, demand for fish is rising.



Thousands of European fishermen could be without work

West Africa is no exception to these global trends. Over the past 25 years, millions have flocked to the coastal cities, pulled by the lure of modernisation and pushed by punishing droughts and rural poverty.

Modern industrial trawlers stay at sea for weeks

and even months, and modern pirogues, equipped with iceboxes and with enough room for up to 15 crewmen, can also stay at sea for up to 15 days.

Old cars, new fish

Fish stocks along the Senegalese coast, for example, are in such crisis that the government has taken to tossing old cars and even decommissioned tanks into the sea in a desperate bid to create artificial reefs to attract fish back.

According to Oceanium, a Senegalese marine environment non-governmental organisation, it now takes one pirogue one month to catch the same amount of fish that it used to catch in four days.

So Senegal's waters are already going the same way as the depleted fishing grounds of the North Sea and the once teeming waters off the coast of the north-east United States and Newfoundland.

According to a recent FAO study, 10% of the world's marine fish populations were depleted or recovering from depletion, up to 18% were overexploited and up to 50% were fully exploited.

Dwindling supplies

There is a lack of detailed scientific data for West African stocks but the evidence from fishermen across the region is compelling.

They say that there is less fish and the fish they catch are getting smaller.

In Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, one Portuguese fish exporter reports that even four years ago there were a lot more fish.

“**Fishing in third countries is not unethical, the point is to make sure it is done in a proper way**”

**Gregor Kreuzhuber,
EC fisheries
spokesman**

Then he was buying up to eight tonnes a day from local fishermen. Today, two tonnes is considered an exceptionally good day.

Policing the fish

Faced with a sharp decline in stocks, the West African countries and the EC all talk about sustainable fishing policies.

Gregor Kreuzhuber, the EC's fisheries spokesman, defends the EC's fishing policies saying: "Fishing in third countries is not unethical, the point is to make sure it is done in a proper way."

This is easier said than done as it is extremely difficult to police agreements reached between foreign and African countries on how much and what type of fish the foreigners can take.

The EU's fishing agreements with West Africa are currently coming under increasing scrutiny from environmental pressure groups such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), which wields considerable financial and media influence.

Poor management

Dr Claude Martin, the director general of WWF International, which is based in Switzerland, recently launched a major attack on the EC saying that it knew "first-hand the devastating effect ill-managed fisheries have had in its own waters".

He added: "It is inconceivable to think the commission would use taxpayers' money to export this unsustainable fishing practice to threatened coastal states in West Africa."

Environmentalists say that the core of the problem is that, for political reasons, the EU has subsidised its fishing fleets, meaning that it now has a vast overcapacity.

Since the EU's own stocks are so severely depleted there is political pressure on the commission to secure as much access to West African and other waters as possible.

The alternative is to embark upon a policy that would eventually mean sacking thousands of

fishermen, some from politically sensitive areas such as Spain's Basque country.

Sustainable fishing

This is a problem no government, which sooner or later has to face re-election, wishes to be saddled with.

With only 25-27% of marine fish populations now reported to be under exploited or only moderately exploited, it is expected that increased demand will, in future, have to be met by an increase in fish farming.

In the meantime, the fish-rich West African countries face agonising choices, not dissimilar from those facing central African countries rich in timber.

They need the money now, but once the fish and trees are gone, they are gone.