



Environment, Fish Brought to the World's Trading Table

GENEVA, Switzerland, March 19, 2002 (ENS) - Reducing the subsidies that governments pay to their nations' fishing fleets which then strip the oceans bare, is one of the topics on the table when the Committee on Trade and the Environment of the World Trade Organization starts formal negotiations in Geneva on Friday.

Tuna purse seiners in the West African port of Dakar, Senegal (Photo courtesy [NOAA](#))



The environmental effects of trade are now firmly on the agenda following decisions made at the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference that took place in Doha, Qatar last November.

So that developing countries can extract the greatest benefit from this new round of international trade negotiations, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is holding two workshops. A two day event that focuses on capacity building in environment, trade and development, opens today.

The first, concentrating on fisheries, took place last Friday. It dealt with overfishing in the waters of developing countries, an important issue for this round of trade talks.

Hussein Abaza, head of UNEP's Economic and Trade Branch, said Friday, "We are slowly amassing a wealth of hard facts about the complex relationship between trade liberalization, subsidies and their environmental and social impacts, especially in the area of fisheries."

"It is becoming clear," Abaza said, "that developing countries stand to gain a great deal from trade in fisheries products, but only if trade and fisheries policies are reformed to support sustainable management of these resources."

UNEP commissioned a study of the relationship between fisheries and trade in Mauritania, a West African country, where European Union, Japanese and Chinese boats have been given access to fishing grounds.



Women await the return of fishermen on the West African shore of Mauritania. (Photo courtesy [FAO](#))

The study, disclosed at the fisheries workshop Friday, found that some fish species, such as sawfish, have completely disappeared. Catches of octopus have dropped to half what they were four years ago.

Abaza said. "The country studies we have commissioned, including this new one from Mauritania, not only shed important light on the damage that can be caused by unregulated trade liberalization, but offer pointers to the actions needed so that trade in fish contributes to development and sustains marine ecosystems."

The waters around the Southeast Asian country of Bangladesh can support more fishing, the workshop heard. A second UNEP report found that fish stocks in Bangladesh's waters could generate employment and millions of dollars of foreign exchange earnings for one of the world's poorest countries.

But strict safeguards must be in place before fishing activities are increased, or foreign fleets are invited in, UNEP officials said. Otherwise Bangladesh could find that its fish populations too become vulnerable to over-exploitation, inflicting economic costs and putting at risk much needed food supplies for its own people, rather than generating income.

Fisherman travels from the town of Khulna, Bangladesh to the Sundarbans mangrove forest area on a fishing trip. (Photo by G. Grepin courtesy [FAO](#))



Delegates from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) were among those at the fisheries workshop. WWF is warning that unless the WTO recognizes appropriate trade measures within Multilateral

Environmental Agreements (MEAs) there could be "serious consequences for human health and the environment."

Multilateral Environmental Agreements are international agreements signed by many governments such as the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

In an open letter to government trade delegations, WWF stressed that trade measures are crucial to some of the 200 MEAs currently in existence. Within

these agreements, trade measures allow regulation of trade in environmentally harmful products and can be used to remove the economic incentives that encourage environmental destruction.

Trade measures are also important in encouraging wide membership of the MEAs, says the conservation organization.

"WTO rules are already being used to undermine multilateral solutions to global environmental problems," said Aimee Gonzales, WWF's senior policy advisor on trade issues.

"Many governments are being schizophrenic about this whole thing - negotiating an environmental treaty through one ministry, and undermining that same deal through the trade ministry. It is time that they clarify the links between MEAs and the WTO."

WWF cautions that any outcome of WTO negotiations must avoid limiting the options of policy makers when negotiating environmental treaties.