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EU fishing fleets devastate third world

World's poorest countries sell off fishing rights for agreements that ruin resources

By *The Guardian Unlimited*

Mar. 18 - WorldCatch News Network - Over-fishing by foreign fleets, including those from Europe, are causing alarming reductions in fish stocks off west Africa and South America, putting local fishermen out of business and removing valuable food resources, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep).

The world's poorest countries are selling off their fishing rights in a series of agreements that are ruining their natural resources.

To try to counter the trend, the UN held a special conference in Geneva yesterday with 100 delegates from the states involved, with environmental groups, the World Trade Organisation, and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Country after country has been plundered by foreign fleets, which have then moved on to new areas, the conference was told.

Case studies by Unep of Mauritania, Argentina and Senegal show that all three countries have depleted stocks. The Mauritanian study published yesterday reveals that catches of octopus have halved in the past four years, and that some species, such as sawfish, have completely disappeared. EU, Japanese and Chinese boats have been given access to the fishing grounds and there are now an estimated 251 industrial, factory-style foreign vessels operating there.

"Over-fishing, due to a failure by some fishing boats to comply with the rules, lack of enforcement and a shortage of fisheries protection boats, alongside other factors, have led to a dramatic fall in catches as fish stocks are over-exploited," the report says.

The EU has paid the Mauritanian government £300m to fish in its waters between 2001 and 2006, but the stocks are already badly depleted. Neighbouring Senegal, which had a similar agreement with the EU, has refused to sign a new one unless it gets better terms. Currently two-thirds of the country's export earnings come from the fish exported to Europe, but fish is the staple diet of coastal communities and it is no longer available in some places because stocks are so low.

The report says that the number of people employed in traditional octopus fishing in Mauritania has fallen from nearly 5,000 in 1996 to about 1,800 now because catches are so small as a result of the operation of foreign vessels.

Euan Dunn, fisheries officer for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, who has been campaigning for fair fisheries agreements which do not deplete stocks, said: "Fish have a habit of jumping on to the rich man's table. Over half the fish we consume in the EU now comes from abroad, and half of this is from these fisheries agreements.

"In Mauritania, octopus is of crucial importance to the local community, but their bread and butter is being taken away. These countries are forfeiting the future health of their fish stocks and their

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people for paltry short-term gains."

The conference was told that Bangladesh is the next country on the list for exploitation of fish stocks. A well-regulated industry could generate employment and large amounts of foreign exchange earnings for one of the world's poorest countries. But the report to the conference said that findings from Mauritania, Senegal and Argentina show that strict safeguards must be in place before fishing activities are increased, or foreign fleets are invited in. "Otherwise Bangladesh could find that its stocks, 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."

Klaus Toepfer, Unep's executive director, said: "Fisheries represent, to many developing countries like Bangladesh, a real opportunity for economic development.

"The fish stocks in many developed country waters have been severely depleted as too many often heavily-subsidised fleets chase too few fish. As a result they are looking elsewhere for catches.

"It is vital that the unsustainable fishing of the past and the present is not exported to the developing world."

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