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Africa Programme



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News from the Sahelian Upwelling Marine Ecoregion

The Sahelian Upwelling Marine Ecoregion (SUME) includes the marine and coastal waters of four countries: Guinea Bissau, Senegal, The Gambia and Mauritania. About thirteen million people inhabit the four countries of the SUME of whom a substantial proportion live along and depend on coastal areas.

The Sahelian upwelling is renowned for its high productivity - especially its pelagic and demersal fisheries - a result of seasonal upwellings and fluvial outflows. It is also important to a number of threatened species including five species of marine turtles, and the critically endangered monk seal. Other important species include sharks and rays, marine mammals such as the bottlenose and humpback dolphins, and manatees and hippopotamus in deltaic areas. The region is renowned for its vast concentrations of overwintering and breeding waterbirds. Areas within this ecoregion are the most important wintering habitat for palearctic birds along the East Atlantic flyway between southern Africa and northern Europe.

Human pressure on the coast is increasingly threatening marine and coastal habitats and species, including through the direct impacts of harvesting. Artisanal fishing is a dynamic and booming sector in all four countries of the ecoregion - the last decades have seen motorisation of pirogues and introduction of new techniques (dynamite fishing) and fishing gears (fine-meshed beach seines, turning seines and traditional shrimp-trawls or "kili") which negatively impact marine biodiversity.

However, the greater threat comes from industrial fisheries - both national fleets and distant water fleets. Heavily subsidised European fleets are guaranteed access to West African waters through fishing agreements negotiated with the EU with little regard for sustainability concerns. Destruction of the fisheries will inevitably impact the local human populations that rely on these resources in some of the world's least developed countries.

In March 2001, WWF - in collaboration with its regional partners IUCN and FIBA - celebrated two important Gifts to the Earth in Mauritania and Guinea Bissau at a series of events involving the President of Mauritania and the Prime Minister of Guinea Bissau.

- Celebration of new legislation for the Banc d'Arguin National Park, and its implementation. The new law strengthens the protection of the Banc d'Arguin National Park - a 12,000 km² coastal wetland, Africa's largest marine protected area - and specifies the creation of an advisory structure representing the indigenous communities residing within the park's borders. It excludes all fishing within the park, except traditional, non-motorised fishing by the local communities.
- The creation of the João Viera / Poilão National Park - a 500 km² marine

protected area in the southern part of the Bijagos Archipelago including Poilão island, the largest green turtle nesting site on the Atlantic coast of Africa.

In Senegal, the third major SUME country, the Minister of Environment expressed his commitment to creating an ecologically representative system of MPAs to serve the dual purposes of conservation and fisheries enhancement.

These actions in West Africa will help to save one of the world's richest marine environments from overfishing distant water fishing fleets, particularly from Europe. A classic example of the European Footprint, this fishery is driven by subsidies to the European fishing fleets, which have purchased access to West African waters as a result of fishing agreements negotiated by the European Commission, and paid for by the European taxpayer.

At a time when EU fisheries agreements are coming up for renewal in the four SUME countries, WWF's Western Africa Programme Office, European Programme Office (EPO) and the Endangered Seas Campaign are combining forces to highlight issues associated with damaging fisheries subsidies and agreements. WWF's response includes development of a Handbook for Negotiating Fishing Access Agreements which is currently being promoted through technical workshops involving the SUME countries.

At the same time the EPO has highlighted the lack of transparency in current agreements for the SUME countries (Fishing in the Dark Symposium, November 2000) and is pointing the failure of the EC to regulate fisheries in its own waters - a sobering lesson in the face of its expanding third country interests.