



July 2001

Feature

## Fisheries caught in a cycle of destruction

By Fred Pearce

*Fishing used to be easy in the Atlantic waters off the West African state of Mauritania. Mohammed ould Swidi, chief of the coastal village of Iwik, remembers it well. But today most of the fish are gone, and for the people of Iwik, life will never be the same again.*

**Iwik, Mauritania:** The fish catch dominated the subsistence economy of Iwik village, which is close to the rich fishing grounds of the Banc d'Arguin, and part of Mauritania's premier national park. But today most of the fish are gone. For in recent years, the rest of the world has discovered these rich fishing grounds and has been plundering them. Stocks are falling fast. And for the people of Iwik, life will never be the same again.

The Banc's 100 kilometres of mudflats and islands stretch out into the Atlantic. They are home to one of the world's richest fisheries. "There is no place like it in Africa," says the chief scientist of the Banc d'Arguin national park, Jean Worms. Fish come from thousands of kilometres away. The Banc is West Africa's biggest fish spawning and feeding area. It is the biological engine that drives the region's productivity up and down the coast.

Under park rules, the handful of fishing boats owned by park inhabitants can legally fish the waters of the Banc, provided they only using sailing vessels. Non-residents and motorised boats are not allowed in. But these days the Banc attracts thousands of motorised fishing boats, called pirogues, from as far away as Senegal and Gambia. Despite the tough new laws to keep them out of the park, many invade illegally at night. Occasionally they get caught.

And meanwhile, the European Commission has bought rights to fish Mauritania's waters, including the large areas of the Banc that lie outside the park, with payments to the Mauritanian government worth some 250 million Euros a year.

The contract, along with similar deals signed by the EU with other West African countries, is being renegotiated right now. And, despite clear evidence of declining fish stocks in the Banc and all down the West African coast, the deals seems certain to be renewed -- and even expanded. The EU has asked neighbouring



Although there looks to be plenty - stocks are falling. Credit: WWF



Trawlers that 'fish the line' just outside the park boundary. Credit: WWF

Senegal for an increase of 60 per cent in allowed catch.

A cycle of destruction is under way that now even includes the park's fishers. As their traditional mullet fishery has shrunk under the onslaught from outsiders, they have begun fishing for other species.

On the beach at Iwik, I watched Italie de Silva gutting sharks, rays and guitar fish, cutting off their fins and laying out the flesh to be dried by the sun and salted by the next incoming tide. There were maybe a hundred fish, brought back after two days at sea. As we spoke, a trader from the capital Nouakchott had arrived on the beach to negotiate sale of the fish. They would fetch perhaps a thousand Euros. Another trader would be along soon to buy the fins for a similar amount.

It sounded good business. But as Italie slit the bellies of the female sharks, we could see foetuses spilling out. In their rush to catch these fish before anyone else gets them, the villagers are destroying the future. Those foetuses should have been next year's catch.

For the real cause of the wrecked fisheries, I looked on the radar screens of the Mauritanian navy in the park, where they constantly watch the trawlers that "fish the line" just outside the park boundary. On the day I visited, there were more than 40 foreign trawlers. They are legal. They don't enter the park. But the damage they do to the fisheries of the park and the wider region, can only be severe, says Pierre Campredon, a French marine biologist.

Foreign vessels take more than half a million tonnes of fish from Mauritanian waters alone each year. That is 30 times more than African fishing boats. And they do little for the country's economy other than fill government coffers. Take the Irish-owned Atlantic Dream. The world's largest fishing vessel, it 144 metres long and seven storeys high, has a crew of 60 and can hold and process 7000 tonnes of fish. It is dedicated full-time to fishing the waters off Mauritania. But the catch is taken for canning to the nearby Canary Islands. Not so much as a sardine touches Mauritanian soil.

The conservation organization WWF awarded the Mauritanian government the designation of the park as a "Gift to the Earth" for its efforts to toughen up the policing of illegal fishing on the Banc d'Arguin. But such policies will only work if the wider fisheries crisis of West Africa is also addressed, says its Director General Claude Martin. WWF is lobbying the European Union to change its destructive fisheries policies.

That should, at the least, mean pushing the foreign trawlers further out to sea and reducing their catch. Campredon believes that, if the trawlers were forced back, the artisanal fishers could one day become custodians of the region's fisheries, rather than partners in its destruction.

*(870 words)*

\*Fred Pearce is a freelance writer working for the WWF Endangered Seas Campaign.