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Maritime

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EU Trawlers Dumping Dead Fish Off West African Coast

By PAUL REDFERN

THE EASTAFRICAN

THOUSANDS OF tonnes of fish are being dumped overboard by the large European Union fishing vessels trawling off the West African coast, according to leading environmentalists.

Because of the so-called industrialised trawling techniques used by EU fishing vessels off the African coast, large amounts of fish are brought in that are not wanted and it is said that up to 90 per cent of catches are being dumped overboard.

While the EU has denied the claims and insists that it is fishing within the agreements set with governments in Africa, Greenpeace says that fish stocks are being rapidly depleted, threatening local fishermen's livelihoods.

Recently, the United Nations Environment Programme reported that EU fishing fleets were endangering poor fishing communities off the coast of West Africa.

The Unep report said that many poor West African countries, including Senegal and Mauritania, had been effectively forced to sell off their fishing rights in a series of agreements that are ruining their natural resources.

Overfishing is also said to be affecting fishing communities off the coast of East Africa, but Unep says it is in West Africa that the effect is most pervasive.

It says that the EU has paid the Mauritanian government £300 million (\$480 million) to fish in its waters between 2001 and 2006 but stocks are already badly depleted. Unep says there are now 251 industrial, factory-style foreign fishing vessels operating off the coast of the West African state.

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

Neighbouring Senegal, which had a similar agreement with the EU has apparently refused to sign a new one unless it gets better terms. The Guardian newspaper says that two thirds of Senegal's export earnings come from the fish exported to

Europe and it adds that fish is the staple diet of coastal communities and is no longer available in some places because stocks are so low.

At a special conference in Geneva on the issue last month, delegates were told that numerous developing countries faced having their fishing stocks plundered by foreign fishing fleets, some of which are from the EU and some Russian or Japanese, which had then moved onto new areas.

Overfishing also has a dramatic effect on local employment with the number of traditional octopus fishermen in Mauritania declining from 5,000 in 1996 to 1,800 now because of overfishing. The UK-based Royal Society for the Protection of Birds which has been campaigning for fair fishing agreements which do not deplete stocks says that fish "have a habit of jumping onto the rich man's table."

Over half the fish consumed in the EU is now said to come from countries outside Europe and now there are urgent calls for strict safeguards to be put in place before any future fishing agreement is made.

Klaus Toepfer, Unep's executive director said that fish stocks in many developing countries "have been severely depleted as too many often heavily-subsidised fleets chase too few fish. As a result they are looking elsewhere for catches."

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