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## African Bush-Meat Trade Linked to EU Overfishing

*James Owen in London  
for [National Geographic News](#)  
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The European Union's taste for West African seafood may be causing more Africans to kill wild animals for food—including lions, leopards, and hippopotamuses—a new study suggests.

Researchers say dwindling fish stocks due to trawling by foreign fishing fleets is a key cause of the increase in the "bush meat" trade in Ghana.

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A Ghanian wildlife ranger holds a waterbuck antelope (*Kobus ellipsiprymnus*) killed by bush-meat hunters weeks before.

*Image courtesy of Justin S. Brashares/Science*



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The study, published tomorrow in the journal *Science*, claims to be the first to provide strong evidence of a link between local fish supply and bush-meat hunting. ([See photographs of bush-meat hunting in Africa](#). Warning: photos include depictions of butchered animals.)

Lead author Justin Brashares, assistant professor of ecosystems science at the University of California, Berkeley, says it's likely that other West African countries are similarly affected.

"If people aren't able to get their protein from fish, they'll turn elsewhere for food and economic survival," he said. "Unfortunately the impacts on wild game resources are not sustainable."

Using data from six Ghanaian nature reserves between 1970 and 1998, the research team found a massive 76 percent fall in abundance for 41 species of larger mammals.

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Over a similar period the marine fish catch in Ghana ranged from 230,000 to 480,000 tons annually, varying by as much as 24 percent in consecutive years. When regional fish supplies dropped, reports of bush-meat hunters on the reserves were seen to rise. Likewise, bush meat for sale at 12 local markets was found to increase when fish supplies fell.

Brashares says wild animals that suffered most were large carnivores such as lions, leopards, and hyenas; primates including colobus and mona monkeys; and several herbivores (hippos, giant hogs, and bongo antelopes).

### **Fishing Funded by European Union**

The researchers note that subsidized foreign fleets have taken much of the blame for Ghana's depleted fish stocks, particularly those from European Union (EU) countries. The study shows that financial aid for EU fishing vessels in foreign waters rose from around 6 million U.S. dollars in 1981 to more than 350 million dollars in 2001.

Brashares says studies have shown these subsidies artificially increase profitability for EU companies operating in African waters. He added, "If it weren't for this financial support, these studies suggest, it wouldn't be worthwhile for EU fleets to head to West Africa." In 1996, for instance, the equivalent of 229 million U.S. dollars was paid to African governments by the EU for access agreements to African waters, according to the Worldwatch Institute in Washington D.C.

"These agreements are extremely unfair," said Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia, Canada. "If you have a very powerful economy negotiating with a weak one, then it's very difficult for

the weak ones to say no."

Pauly, who isn't connected with the new study, adds that foreign vessels are often granted access to fishing grounds with no limits on catch.

"It's as if someone gave you three shopping carts for a day at a supermarket and told you that you wouldn't need to go through the cashier," he said.

Tuna are among the main fish species targeted by foreign vessels, Brashares said, with Ghana just one of many West African countries now subject to heavy fishing pressure.

For instance, the number of authorized French and Spanish tuna boats operating off the country of Guinea-Bissau jumped 300 percent from 1994 to 1998. That's an estimated catch increase of 33,000 tons per year, according to fisheries scientists at the University of Washington in Seattle.

### **Bush-Meat Consumption**

Likewise, Brashares says, evidence from Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, and Liberia suggests "strong negative correlations between fish supply and bush-meat consumption." He added, "This is not only a Ghana issue, or a West Africa issue but an issue for much of Africa and perhaps the developing world."

Ghana's markets traditionally sell everything from shark and snapper to sardinella and anchovy. Brashares says these smaller, open-ocean species are particularly important sources of protein for poorer communities, as they can be dried and transported to remote inland regions.

The researchers say reforming EU policy won't completely resolve the problem of depleted stocks, partly because other nations also fish off West Africa. But they say it's a solution that can be enacted quickly.

Study co-author Andrew Balmford, senior lecturer in conservation biology at Cambridge University in England, added, "Given the EU's expressed concerns about the bush-meat trade, phasing out subsidies to their own fleets offers at least a short-term route to limit the trade, while simultaneously enhancing local fishers' livelihoods."

In the longer term the study highlights the need to provide alternative sources of protein such as cattle.

Brashares added, "Livestock production is increasing rapidly but it just isn't anywhere near the point where it can replace fish and bush meat. The limited availability and high costs associated with livestock production make domestic meat too expensive for most Ghanaians."

*James Owen is a freelance science and nature journalist based in London.*

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