

A Symposium with Results

by *Daniel Pauly*

The waters off West Africa, like most other productive parts of the world ocean have been, in the last decades, strongly exploited by coastal fisheries and by distant water fleets (DWF), but a controversy has long raged about the 'real' state of the resources. There were several reasons for this, one being the variability of some shorter-lived groups such as octopus and shrimps, which boomed when the biomass of the bottom fishes declined. Another obstacle to understanding was the competition between large national fisheries, often overgrown 'small-scale' fisheries, and DWF, whose different gear, mode of operation and especially origins made it difficult for some researchers to conceive that these fisheries have similar, and combined effects on the underlying resources. One final factor of confusion was the tendency among fisheries biologist working in West Africa to closely track fish population abundance, and in the process, to lose track of

long-term change, a process that occurs throughout the world, and which I have elsewhere called the 'shifting baseline syndrome of fisheries.'

To address these and related issues, a group of researchers, representing institution from, or working in West Africa, teamed up two years ago to launch an international symposium on "Marine Fisheries, Ecosystems and Societies in West Africa: half a century of change", that would emphasize the impact of fisheries on West African ecosystems, and the downstream consequences on West African countries, and going back deep enough in time for major trends to emerge.

The main partners involved in the preparation of this symposium were the Fisheries Commission for the countries of the Northwest African 'subregion' ('Commission sous-régionale des pêches,' or CSRP, based in Dakar, and servicing Mauritania, Cape Verde, Senegal, The

Gambia, Guinea and Guinea-Bissau, with Sierra Leone as a future member); the French Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD, ex-ORSTOM); the EU-funded Fisheries Information and Analysis System project (FIAS), devoted to recovering data on the fish, fish catches and ecosystems of the CSRP countries, and the Sea Around Us Project. The interaction between these entities was straightforward, notably because the Principal Investigator of the SAUP, besides serving as the science advisor of the FIAS project, also chaired the symposium's scientific committee.

The symposium consisted of two components. The first 'subregional' component, lasting from June 24 to 25, was devoted to the results of the first two years of the FIAS project, i.e., to work conducted in the CSRP area, including two contribution by SAUP members (Sheila Heymans

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on fisheries-induced changes in the ecosystem off Sierra Leone Ecosystem, and Sylvie Guénette, on the ecosystem off Guinea). The second 'international component,' lasting from June 26 to 28, was devoted to accounts from other part of West Africa, and to syntheses. The SAUP contributions to this consisted of presentations by Reg Watson (subregional fisheries catch maps), Villy Christensen (biomass trend maps), Rashid Sumaila (presenting joint work with Jackie Alder, on the role of DWF in West Africa), Deng Palomares (Poster of CD-ROM documenting Northwest African ecosystems and fisheries; see Palomares, this volume) and Daniel Pauly (Trophic level change as indicators of fisheries impacts

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on marine ecosystems; and ecosystem impacts of fisheries in Ghana and Namibia, presented on behalf of absent colleagues). The full title of the SAUP and other presentations are documented on the symposium web page, more about which below.

Few conferences, at least in this author's experience, lead to a convergence of opinions among their participants, and even fewer conclude with a consensus statement. This one did, and the full text of our consensus statement may be found on the symposium web site. Its major parts are:

- 1) "The reconstruction of long time series by the FIAS project has allowed demonstration, for the countries of the sub-region, that the biomass of bottom fishes has strongly declined, and that this is due beyond reasonable doubt to the impact of fishing;
- 2) A few short-lived species (e.g., cephalopods) have shown different trends [from those of longer-lived demersal fishes] but here as well, the impact of fishing is obvious, and overexploitation frequently occurs;
- 3) The present demersal fish biomass in the countries of the sub-region are well below levels that allow sustained high catches;
- 4) The demersal fisheries of the sub-region are so low as to render them highly sensitive to

environmental effects;

- 5) The strengthening of sub-regional and international cooperation through the FIAS project has established these facts clearly and unambiguously."

This was seen as having the following implications:

- 6) "Overall fishing effort in the sub-region must be strongly reduced, in particular for demersal species, to re-establish high and sustainable catches, and to minimize the risk of environmental impacts;
- 7) We are aware of the socio-economic implications of such reduction [of fishing effort], but there is no doubt that it is necessary;
- 8) It is important to strengthen national capacity and sub-regional collaboration (as done by the FIAS project) in order to fill the scientific gaps that still exist;
- 9) This goal, and the maintenance and full utilization of the database assembled by the FIAS project require, among other things, that the capabilities of the sub-regional fisheries commission be strengthened."

The international component of the symposium elaborated on these nine points, and expanded them to cover the whole of West Africa, down to Namibia.

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The *Sea Around Us* website may be found at www.fisheries.ubc.ca/projects/saup, and contains up-to-date information on the project.

The *Sea Around Us* project is a Fisheries Centre partnership with the Pew Charitable Trusts of Philadelphia, USA. The Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments to help organisations and citizens develop practical solutions to difficult problems. In 2000, with approximately \$4.8 billion in assets, the Trusts committed over \$235 million to 302 nonprofit organisations.

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Now some will say they knew all along that the fisheries resources of West Africa are overfished. However, this very point is regularly contested during negotiation between e.g., the European Union and West African countries, leading to ever more DWF exploiting what are now strongly depleted resources, thus endangering the long-term development prospect and food security of the West African countries in question.

To get that message across, the SAUP, in the person of its principal investigator, teamed up with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature (WWF) and a colleague from the University of Washington, whom we had invited to the symposium, Dr

David Fluharty, who recently co-authored a contribution questioning the value, to West African countries, of the Fisheries Agreements they sign with the EU (Kaczynski and Fluharty 2001). This started right in Dakar, during a joint SAUP/WWF press conference held on June 28, in which the chief executive of the WWF, Mr Claude Martin, also participated. Fifteen journalists were in attendance, notably from Radio France International and the Pan African News Agency. The resulting coverage included three TV broadcasts, three radio broadcasts and one newspaper article in *Le Soleil*, Dakar's

leading daily (text available from symposium web page - <http://fisheries.ubc.ca/Projects/SAUP/Dakar/press.html>).

David Fluharty and Daniel Pauly then flew to Madrid, where they presented on July 2 the results of the Dakar Symposium to Spanish colleagues, and WWF staff. On July 3, they visited the head of the 'International Fishing Agreement' section in the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food,



*Daniel Pauly speaks at the opening ceremony of the conference
Photo by Pierre Chavance*

Mr. Rafael Centenera, who had just returned from the negotiations that lead to the latest round of agreements between the EU and Senegal, Angola and Mozambique. We were impressed by his tremendous knowledge of the minutiae of West African fisheries, and his formidable rhetorical skills, both of which go a long way in explaining the nature of some of the agreements thus negotiated. We also conducted interviews with a team from 'TV2,' specialized in agriculture and fisheries issues, with SER Broadcasting, and with *El País*, Spain's major daily.

Then on to Brussels, via Paris, where we bought an issue of *La Recherche*, containing a just published paper (Pauly et al. 2002) that came in rather handy, given that it deals with overfishing in the North Atlantic, and the need to set up marine reserves, and was written in one of the main languages of the European Commission (EC). The EC's Directorate General for Fisheries (DG Fish) is presently struggling to get across its planned reform of the 'Common Fisheries Policy,' which includes strong reduction of European fishing fleets. Our presentation of July 4 to staff of DG Fish, on the impact of EU vessels on West African resources went well with those in the audience that were serious about the reforms, and the copies of the *La Recherche* paper we had quickly made were snapped up. But it was obvious that there are members of DG Fish who are still struggling

to free themselves from the net the fishing industry threw over their heads.

On the other hand, our subsequent contribution to a joint WWF/European Policy Centre meeting on 'The Common Fisheries Policy: the case for radical reform' was clearly well received by its audience of about seventy journalists, embassy staff, representatives from European regional government and other "EU actors," as shown, notably, by the interviews we were invited to give to Reuters and *New Scientist*, among others.

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The high speed train that took us back to Paris on July 5 did not require our shoes to be x-rayed, and we still got there as fast as if we had flown. So we made it to a 'press breakfast' at the Café Marly, near the pyramid of the Louvre, where we made, again, the case for considering the state of West African resources when negotiating fisheries agreements, this time to journalists from *Les Echos*, *Le Figaro*, and the Agence France Presse. The day – and a rather hectic week – were completed at the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where we reported on the Dakar Symposium (which they partly funded), and again discussed the agreements....

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Here are some lessons we learnt from, or that were confirmed by our successful symposium, and the post-symposium trip:

- 1) A well-prepared, focused scientific meeting can lead to a consensus on previously contentious issues, thus clearing the way for policy (at least we can't later be blamed for dithering);
- 2) Scientists working on environmental issues will find interested science journalists working in TV, newspaper and other media, given that they make an effort in addressing the 'so what' question that journalists cannot avoid in their work, even if we sometimes can;
- 3) It is getting time to do something about overfishing, which is really turning into a global plague.

We invite readers interested in the above meeting and/or its follow up to visit that part of the SAUP web devoted to the Dakar Symposium (www.fisheries.ubc.ca/projects/



*Participants pose for a group photograph outside the conference venue
Photo by Pierre Chavance*

saup/Dakar/index.htm, where, pending the publication of full proceedings, and using generous funding from the Oak Foundation, we will make available the bulk of the material (Powerpoints, posters) presented at that symposium, along with related material published later.

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