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African Waters Over Fished

The New Times (Kigali)

NEWS

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Kigali

Several scientists last week warned about an upcoming collapse of all commercial African in-land and ocean fisheries. But even critics agree that especially the waters in Africa are among the most likely to experience collapsing fisheries due to over fishing and poor management and monitoring.

All species of fish that are currently fished on in-land waters and oceans are projected to collapse by the year 2050, according to a new four year study by an international team of ecologists and economists. In the study, collapse is defined as 90 per cent depletion.

The ecologist and economist study has already been widely criticized for just projecting current trends to the future, assuming the same size of current fisheries in different regions.

Nevertheless, the scientists can point to several vast fisheries that have totally collapsed due to over fishing in recent decades.

As the world's leading fish and seafood markets have reduced the capacities of their near seas, fishing fleets from in particular the European Union (EU) and Japan are seeking new grounds farther and farther away. By now, practically all coastal and inland African nations have signed far-reaching and extensive fisheries treatments with the EU or other rich countries.

Environmentalists have warned against these EU-African treaties for a long time, claiming they are not based on sustainability.

They accuse the Europeans of over fishing African waters, leading to the same collapses here as experienced in the North. Especially along the West, south African coast, which has the longest history of fisheries treaties with the EU, artisanal fishermen have already warned about depleted grounds. In many countries, local fleets find it difficult to survive and seafood prices are skyrocketing.

The warning signals therefore had arrived in Africa long before the current study on the world's wild fisheries. And while a substantial part of the marine science environment is skeptical towards the study, all agree that most fisheries at some stage will head towards a collapse if management is not improved.

In particular, concerns are high when it comes to African fisheries. Ray Hilborn, a US professor of aquatic and fishery sciences skeptical of the study, said good management was a key.

"I am worried about some areas of the world, like Africa, but other areas of the world have figured out how to do effective fishery management," he commented on the study.

In Africa, he held management of fisheries was not good enough to meet the challenges of over fishing.

Previous studies of world over fishing have also singled out African waters as being on the brink of collapse.

A recent study published in 'New Scientist' in 2002 in particular warned about African waters, where according to US researcher Daniel Pauly, fish stocks already had "crashed by 80 percent."

With depleting resources along the African coast, EU vessels have since that moved further with full strength southwards and even into the Indian Ocean.

Already now, the rich waters off Namibia and Angola are beginning to note reductions in fish stocks. Waters off the Seychelles and Madagascar are set to be next.

While fisheries management and monitoring has improved over the last few years - largely due to pressure from environmentalist groups against the EU to improve its terms and go for sustainability - most African countries still depend on the goodwill of the EU to properly manage the resources they sell out to the European fishing industry. Scientists and environmentalists warn that this is not enough, and point to the disastrous results in the EU's own waters.

Some nations however, in particular in Southern Africa and the Maghreb, have been able to implement a modern and more effective management and legislation.

Monitoring is also improving, with the new generation of EU-African fisheries agreements including satellite monitoring programmes. This, environmentalists hold, however is far from enough, as most African states have no means of effectively controlling whether EU vessels stick to legislation, whether they dump undersize captures or whether they turn off the satellite equipment altogether. Further, the ever-increasing number of pirate trawlers outsourced from Europe's and Russia's oversized fleet does not care about any of these regulations.

Meanwhile, also African nations are starting to come to terms with the consequences of future fisheries depletion. As world market fish and seafood prices are increasing steeply, those able to afford it turn away from the wild fisheries and use modern technology to start fish farming. In South Africa, mariculture is already a booming industry and several Southern African nations are set to follow. Trust in wild fisheries, it seems, has evaporated.

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