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Offshore Disturbance: Global Fishing Trade Depletes African Waters --- Poor Nations Get Cash, The Rich Send Trawlers; A Dearth of Octopus

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NOUADHIBOU, Mauritania -- Sall Samba prospered for years by catching octopus in the bountiful seas near this scruffy port town on Africa's west coast.

Today, he struggles to catch half what he did just a few years ago. Tough times recently forced him to beach two of his three canoes and to fire 10 fishermen. "You used to be able to fish right in the port," says Mr. Samba, a 39-year-old father of six. "Now, the only thing you can catch here is water."

Mauritania's octopus shortage is the result of the global trade in fishing rights between rich countries and poor. Impoverished nations like Mauritania have been selling access to their seas to European and Asian nations that have fished out their own waters. As a result, small fry like Mr. Samba must compete with huge trawlers from Spain, Russia and China. These days, at least 340 foreign boats are licensed to fish off Mauritania.

Wealthy countries subsidize their commercial fishermen to the tune of about $30 billion a year. Their goal is to keep their fishermen on the water. China, for example, provides $2 billion a year in fuel subsidies; the European Union and its member nations provide more than $7 billion of subsidies a year. Such policies boost the number of working boats, increase the global catch and drive down fish prices. That makes it more difficult for fishermen in poor nations like Mauritania, who get no subsidies, to compete.

The end result: African waters are losing fish stock rapidly, with ramifications both to the economies of Africa's coastal nations and to the world's ocean ecology. Over the past three decades, the amount of fish in West African waters has declined by up to 50%, according to Daniel Pauly, a researcher at the University of British Columbia.

On Africa's coast, thousands of fishermen have been put out of work. Some have been using their boats to try to migrate illegally to Europe. The economic effect extends beyond fishermen to the many women who sell fish in markets in coastal communities.

Shifting global dietary patterns are partly to blame. A booming world-wide appetite for seafood has lifted the fishing industry's global production to record levels. Total fish trade grew to $71.5 billion in 2004, up nearly 25% from 2000, according to the Rome-based Food and Agriculture Organization, or FAO, an office of the United Nations. "There are too many boats chasing too few fish," says Grimur Valdimarsson, director of the FAO's fisheries division.

EU officials and other beneficiaries of fishing-rights agreements contend that the real problem is that domestic fishermen aren't regulated. They work close to shore, where fish like to spawn. EU officials also maintain that developing countries are woeful managers of their own fish stocks.

Decades ago, when fish got scarce off one nation, commercial fishermen simply went somewhere else. Until the 1970s, boats from places with big fishing industries, such as Spain, the United Kingdom and Japan, simply fished wherever they wanted.

Iceland and Norway -- two nations especially hurt by the practices -- led an international movement to gain rights for individual governments to restrict fishing in their coastal waters. In 1982, U.N. member nations signed a treaty that gave countries the power to restrict fishing within 231 miles of their coasts. Foreign vessels had to obtain permission before fishing within those areas.

African nations began selling fishing access to governments and companies. Most of these African countries didn't have large commercial industries to protect. At first, local fishermen working close to shore didn't notice. There was little oversight or management of fish stocks. For years, the arrangement seemed to make sense. The rich world got affordable fish; poor governments got cash.

Because European fish stocks had declined sharply, the EU -- whose member nations account for about 85,000 fishing vessels -- needed to find new fishing grounds. Serafin Fernandez, managing director of the company that owns the Segundo San Rafael, a 100-foot Spanish vessel that fishes for octopus in Mauritania, notes that rising fuel costs and low-cost Chinese competition are squeezing profits, adding to pressure to find waters where fish are more plentiful.

The EU has struck deals with more than a dozen African countries, ranging from Angola to Mozambique. Paying for access to foreign waters is vital "to preserving the economic vitality of our industry," says Jose Ramon Fuertes Gamundi, president of Anacef, an association of Spanish companies that fish in African waters.

China, Russia, Ukraine and other nations have also signed deals with Mauritania, sometimes paying with military equipment. The U.S. has several deals to fish for Pacific tuna with island nations like Micronesia.

Some governments have changed their minds about whether such deals make sense over the long term. Senegal, which used to dump old cars into the ocean to make artificial reefs to attract fish, last year canceled its contract with the EU in an effort to preserve fish stocks for its own fishermen. Morocco suspended its fishing agreement with the EU in 2001 for the same reason. It renewed the deal last year, but cut down on the number of boats allowed.

Mauritania's waters are attractive to foreign fishing vessels. Wind blowing off the Sahara draws cold water from the bottom of the ocean, creating ideal feeding conditions for fish.

Until recently, this nation of 3.2 million has managed to preserve its fish stocks better than most, in part because of its culture. A French colony until 1960, Mauritania is split between Arab and black Africans. Nomadic Arabs, who dominate politics and the economy, do not have a tradition of fishing. "We like the desert, not water," says Mohamed Ould Sid Ahmed, an engineer for fishing companies.

A drought in the 1970s and 1980s pushed people to the coast. The number of small fishing vessels grew to 3,600 in 2000, from 500 in 1986, according to the EU. Eager to keep its people fed, the government made no effort to license or control domestic boats or catches.

The government also began relying on revenue generated from sales of fishing rights to foreigners. The cash helped sustain the nation through hunger, war with Senegal between 1989 and 1991, and several coups d'etat.

The EU inked its first fishing deal with Mauritania in 1987. When negotiations on a new treaty began in 2004, the EU promised to respect a U.N. treaty agreement against fishing depleted stock.

Octopus was a particular concern to Mauritania's fishermen. Each year, it accounts for about half of the country's $140 million of fish exports. A committee of Mauritanian scientists found that the octopus stock had declined by 31% from historical averages. The country's fisheries ministry recommended opposing any deal that permitted EU nations to fish for octopus, arguing that the species needed to recover.

EU negotiators offered to cut the number of boats fishing the species to 43 from 53, but not to limit the total octopus catch. Former Mauritanian President Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, a colonel who seized power in an August 2005 coup, pressured his fisheries ministry to accept the deal, Mauritanian officials say. Mr. Vall could not be reached for comment.

Last July, Mauritania netted the EU's biggest fish payout ever: $700 million over six years, with a clause allowing for a renegotiation after two years. The money now provides one-third of the government's annual budget.

Life expectancy in the country is just 55 years; the literacy rate is only 60%. A government spokesman says the country is committed to spending on health and education.

The EU defends its decision to fish octopus. "We are cutting capacity," says Rachid Karroum, who coordinates the fisheries agreement for the EU from Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott, a city of dusty roads and crumbling bungalows. "We want to help Mauritania manage its stock."

The pact calls for Mauritania to spend $13 million a year on conservation measures, including using radar to keep track of boats in its waters and licensing the country's 4,000 or so canoes.

EU scientists say the country's waters can only support 1,000 canoes, and that unregulated fishing by locals pressures fish populations. Fish like to spawn in protected coastal areas, making them especially vulnerable to small-scale fishing.

There are 99 Chinese boats fishing in Mauritanian waters, all operating in joint ventures with domestic companies. In 2005, China, which catches more fish than any other nation, gave Mauritania two fighter jets as partial compensation for fishing rights.

For Mauritania, the alternative to selling access to its waters is to develop companies to catch, package and export fish on a larger scale. But the challenges are great. The nation's barter culture has hampered the development of a sophisticated banking system, and interest rates exceed 25%. Daily power outages mean companies would need to invest in generators to make ice for storing fish.

The port of Nouadhibou also presents problems. Dozens of aged and rusty boats, mostly from Asia, fish Mauritanian waters. There are now 107 wrecks in the port, so only a few vessels can come in at once.

These days, most local fishing is an exercise in subsistence. On recent days in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, men hauled boats out of the water, filled boxes with fish, then carried the boxes on their heads or on donkey carts to local markets or small processing companies. Children scooped up fish that fell to the ground and handed them to the women who sell fish in stalls and markets throughout the city.

Mr. Samba, the Nouadhibou fisherman, has been more successful than most. In 1989, a local processing company lent him money to buy a wooden canoe. He also bought the plastic octopus pots he lowers from the side of his boat. In three months, he says, he made enough to reimburse the company, the Cooperative des Produits Artisanaux de l'Atlantique, or CPAA.

"Meeting EU health and safety standards is expensive," says Aziz Boughourbal, general manager of CPAA, one of Mauritania's few domestic processing and packaging companies. "We found international loans to build our plant, but we're an exception." Next door is a shantytown where women sell mounds of fish buzzing with flies.

Times were good for Mr. Samba in the 1990s and early 2000s. His boats usually caught 160 pounds of octopus on each five-day sortie, which could bring in as much as $2,300 a month, he says. After paying costs and crew, he says, he could take home $600 a month, a rich sum in a place where average monthly wages are around $200. In 2004, he finished building a house in Nouadhibou. He bought new canoes in 1997 and 2004.

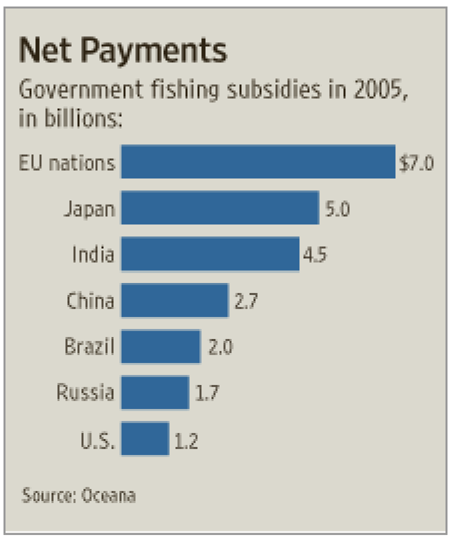
Although Mr. Samba has money saved to buy more vessels, it wouldn't be worth it, he says, because octopus catches are falling fast. His monthly income from fishing, he says, has now dropped below $200. CPAA is also suffering. The volume of octopus it processes dropped to 818 tons last year, from 1,241 in 2001.

The Segundo San Rafael, the Spanish vessel, catches octopus in far greater quantity than Mr. Samba can. Dragging a nylon net, the vessel and its crew of two dozen can catch 260,000 pounds of octopus on a 45-day outing, according to Mr. Fernandez, managing director of the company that owns it. After processing its catch in Dakar, Senegal, or in Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands, the company exports it to Europe, Japan and the U.S.

The Segundo San Rafael is owned by Senevisa SA, a Senegalese subsidiary of Grupo Eduardo Vieira SA, a midsize Spanish fishing company founded in 1888. The company fished the North Sea until three years ago, when fish stocks fell too low to make a profit, Mr. Fernandez says. The company now focuses on the Pacific and West Africa.

Mr. Fernandez, who is based in Dakar, agrees that West African waters are overfished. "You have the EU, the Russians, the Chinese and all the small boats," he says. The solution, he contends, is for African countries to keep a tighter grip on their own waters, and to manage their resources through joint ventures, with the help of fishing companies like Senevisa.

Sall Samba



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