

TheNational

Trawlers threaten west Africa fish stocks

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Last Updated: June 08, 2008 6:58PM UAE / June 8, 2008 2:58PM GMT

LAKKA VILLAGE, SIERRA LEONE //Mathew Palmer hauled his small dugout canoe onto the soft, white sand after a morning spent fishing along a picturesque coastline. For almost half a century his daily routine has varied little, but now he says there is one major difference – the fish are not there.

Mr Palmer, 67, said he sometimes goes days without hooking a fish on his line. On this day he was lucky to catch about three-dozen small snapper, but it was a meagre haul compared with that of previous years.

As a young man, he would often return to his village with the floor of his canoe covered in fish, he said. And so it was for his father and grandfather. "Now I cannot see that kind of fish."

Mr Palmer and other fishermen in the tiny seaside village blame illegal trawling for drastically reducing fish stocks.

While unlicensed trawlers are known to prowl west Africa's once-rich fishing grounds, even licensed vessels venture illegally into the exclusion zone.

Saleu Deen, a local fisherman, blamed the trawlers for damaging and destroying nets placed inside the zone. At night villagers can see their lights, he said.

"Our parents brought us up with fishing," he said. "Now everything is gone because of the trawlers."

If they are right, their situation is about to get worse.

Moses Kapu, Sierra Leone's fisheries minister, said the government was working on a deal with the European Union. It would add about 100 vessels to the 30 or 40 mostly Chinese and Korean trawlers currently licensed to operate in Sierra Leone's waters. West African countries from Senegal to Angola have signed deals with the EU.

"We do not have a partnership with the EU," Mr Kapu said. "This is what we are pursuing."

Mohammed Sesay, the ministry's director of research and statistics, discounted claims that trawling was destroying Sierra Leone's fishery.

"It is doing well," he said. "Fishermen will always tell you they are not catching enough."

He said a team of scientists was doing a survey of fish stocks off the Sierra Leone coast, using a vessel on loan from Senegal. The survey, which is due to finish in a few weeks, will bring the government one step closer to signing an agreement.

"It's a matter of negotiating how much is available and how much they can take," Mr Sesay said.

But critics warn that west Africa's fishery is on the verge of collapse and such deals could be catastrophic to remaining fish stocks.

"To imagine 130 modern trawlers ploughing the waters of Sierra Leone would definitely spell doomsday for the resources," said Michael Vakily, an adviser at the Dakar-based Sub-Regional Fisheries Commission.

He does, however, prefer agreements with the EU to those with countries like China or Korea.

"There is at least some possibility to use public opinion in Europe to force the EU fishing fleet to live up to European standards," Mr Vakily said.

"Many stocks have already collapsed and others will gradually follow," said Daniel Pauly, a fisheries biologist at the University of British Columbia in Canada, who has studied fisheries around the world and who Science has called "arguably the world's most prolific and widely cited living fisheries scientist".

"This is not a sudden thing, but a slow grinding down of one stock after another."

In 2006 he co-wrote a study published in the journal Science that predicted a global fisheries collapse by 2050 if current fishing practices do not change.

Mr Pauly, who began researching west Africa at the beginning of his career, said he saw the same pattern here that he had seen in other overfished regions.

In 2002, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) warned that half of west Africa's stocks of bottom fish had disappeared in two decades. That same year, an EU report found that Senegal's fish biomass had fallen by 75 per cent over 15 years. Yet the EU renewed a four-year fishing deal with Senegal in 2002, paying the government US\$16 million (Dh59m) a year.

According to the WWF, cash-strapped west African governments see such agreements as a badly needed source of revenue.

Sierra Leone is the world's poorest country, according to a UN Human Development Index.

Developing fisheries was key to economic growth, Mr Kapu said.

He said fish stocks could be protected through proper management.

The EU had provided funding to build the ministry's capacity to monitor the fishing stock, he said. The ministry plans to place observers on vessels, and it is considering contracting a private company to help police the industry using an advanced radar system and high-speed boats.

Mr Pauly said he had heard similar promises from countries throughout the world, but he added that fish stocks cannot be saved unless nations are willing to drastically reduce the activities of three fishing fleets: the small, local fleets, the distant water fleets operating through fishing agreements, and the illegal or semi-legal fleets operating without agreements.

"These jointly exert far more pressure than the stocks can sustain," he said.

Mr Deen, who sat mending his nets on the beach, was also sceptical of the government's ability to manage a larger fishery. He said he worked for three years as a deckhand on trawlers fishing off the coasts of Senegal, Guinea and Liberia.



Saleu Deen mends his nets at Lakka Village in Sierra Leone. Jared Ferrie / The National

While the vessels were meant to declare their catches when they went into port, they often avoided being monitored by off-loading their catches onto boats that met them at sea, he said.

Industrial fishing has already been blamed for destroying fisheries around the world, including Canada's Newfoundland cod fishery, which was considered the world's richest for 500 years. It collapsed in 1992, leaving 40,000 people jobless, according to Greenpeace.

A similar collapse in west Africa could be even more devastating to desperately poor coastal communities.

"To the local populations, fish is often the only source of animal protein," Mr Pauly said. "The foreign fleets endanger their food security."

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