

The Crisis in World and European Fish Stocks: *Consequences for the Fishing Sectors and Local Livelihoods in West Africa*

**A summary of Brian O’Riordan’s presentation to the Feasta conference
So that was Johannesburg, Now what? on 21st September, 2002.**

The crisis in the world and European fisheries is not one of too many boats chasing too few fish. The root cause is the mode of fishing used, where, encouraged by subsidies, technology has outpaced the capacity of the fish to reproduce and grow. It is widely recognised that this “fishing overcapacity” is a global problem, and a problem with its roots and branches in the industrialisation, modernisation and intensification of fishing.

The FAO have estimated that there are some 45,000 industrial fishing vessels (vessels over 100 grt) worldwide. These represent only 1% of world’s fishing fleet, employ no more than 2% of the fishermen, and yet are responsible for 50% of the fish catch. This sector has reached its zenith in the “super-trawler” fleet – vessels over 100 metres long, using the most destructive and unsustainable modes of fishing devised by mankind. Despite serious overcapacity problems in its own waters, Europe has built up a considerable super-trawler fleet to fish in other countries’ waters. Spearheaded by the Netherlands, this super-trawler fleet is currently targeting some of the most productive but most vulnerable fishing grounds in the world off West Africa. Many of these vessels also have the possibility to fish in European waters.

The majority of the European super-trawlers are fishing under the auspices of the fisheries agreement with Mauritania. Currently a fleet of 12 vessels, 9 Dutch, 1 British and 1 German, are fishing Mauritanian pelagic stocks under this formal arrangement. Others, including the Irish owned Atlantic Dawn and Veronica, are fishing there under private arrangements. The latter are not subject to same restrictions and control measures as the formal fishing agreement, where vessels are required to observe strict limits on vessel numbers (15) and on fishing areas (outside the 12 mile zone).

Worryingly for the small-scale artisanal fleet in other West African countries (Senegal, Guinea, Gambia etc) that also fish these migratory pelagic resources, the build up of European overcapacity in Mauritanian waters is now being matched by the re-building of Russian fishing capacity there.

One of the underpinning causes of the fisheries crisis is the way fisheries are managed. Management systems, based on the hypothetical surplus production of single species, are completely inappropriate for sustaining fish stocks and fishing communities. They encourage a cynical collusion between scientists, politicians and the fishing industry, and are open to corruption and manipulation. The TAC and quota systems are about as effective for managing fish stocks as closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. It is therefore welcome news that proposals are in place to replace this ineffective system with greater controls on fishing effort.

The crisis in Europe (and the rest of the World), of overexploited stocks and environmental degradation, of over capacity fishing fleets, of ever increasing demand and dwindling market supplies, is spilling over into West African fisheries. These are essentially small-scale in nature, providing much-needed livelihoods, food and economic development to some of the world’s most fisheries dependent coastal communities. Europe is increasingly dependent on West Africa both for fishing opportunities – as witnessed by the deployment of the super-trawler fleet there – and for its consumption and processing demands.

A more sinister aspect of the crisis is the contamination of Europe’s depleted fish stocks by carcinogenic dioxins and PCBs, particularly the oily pelagic fish. This is also a subject of growing concern, with consumers now having to question whether the health benefits from consuming fish are outweighed by the health risks.

With greater emphasis being placed on aquaculture to provide production shortfalls from fishing, alarm bells are now ringing over the potentially dangerous levels of chemical pollutants accumulating in farmed fish. Their feed is almost entirely dependent on processed oily fish (mainly as fishmeal). This means that fish farmers are increasingly sourcing their feed supplies from the relatively clean Southern oceans and other less polluted waters – as off West Africa.

In West Africa it is these small pelagic fish (sardine, mackerel etc) that form the backbone of the small-scale fisheries, and which are the main source of essential proteins, vitamins and minerals for the coastal populations. Their depletion by European industrial fishing – particularly such super trawlers as the Atlantic Dawn and the Veronica – raises serious concerns for the future prospects of local small-scale fisheries and the food security of coastal populations in West Africa. One vessel in the super-trawler fleet has the capacity to catch in one day what it would take a fleet of large canoes to catch in one year – with good fishing. A fleet of relatively uncontrolled super-trawlers has the capacity to bring about the collapse of the entire fishery.

In Europe, if we want a fairer and more sustainable World, we need to fish less but more efficiently and less destructively, and to eat less fish. We need to phase out the largest and most destructive fishing vessels, and encourage smaller-scale, selective and safe modes of fishing that provide real benefits to both fishing communities and fish consumers.

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