

Gambia Leans on NGOs to Police Illegal Fishing Practices

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FULL TEXT

More than eighty percent of the world's wild fish stocks have collapsed. With global demand for seafood doubling since the 1960s, this appetite is outpacing what we can sustainably catch and is pushing bigger fishing vessels into smaller nations' waters.

The Gambia, a tiny West-African country, remains among the poorest in the world, and its fish stocks are unable to withstand more industrial fishing. Meanwhile, the fish that Gambians rely on for their survival are rapidly disappearing due to illegal and overfishing propagated by larger nations.

The most recent United Nations Human Development Index, which measures national poverty levels, ranks Gambia 174th out of 189 assessed nations. Food insecurity in The Gambia has risen from 5 to 8 percent over the past five years as a result of drought, floods, and the poor use of natural resources such as its fishing stocks, according to the World Food Programme.

However, in September, 2019, James Gomez, the country's minister of fisheries, said that the country's fisheries were thriving. The fishing industry is the largest employer of Gambians in the country, he added, citing 411 deckhands, 155 observers on fishing boats watching for violations, and dozens working in the fishmeal factories. Gomez also said Gambian waters have enough fish to sustain themselves five times over. 'Boats are not taking more than a sustainable amount,' he reassured.

The claim struck me as dubious. Marine researchers often compare counting fish to counting trees, except the former moves and is largely invisible. Therefore, estimating the health of a country's fish stock is not an exact science.

Few researchers have done a better job at highlighting the flaws in fishery sciences data than Daniel Pauly, a biologist at the University of British Columbia's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries, who has worked for more than two decades to challenge the official statistics, using thousands of sources to assemble a truer picture of what's being taken from the oceans.

For example, he found in a study that global catches, which had risen ever since 1950, began to decline in the 1980s. However, China was reporting rising catches at the impossible total of eleven million tons annually. This was at least double what was scientifically possible, according to Pauly, and it gave international organizations that track ocean health the false impression that the fishing stocks were far more robust than was truly the case. Pauly soon found the reason for the skewed statistics: If production increased, Chinese government officials were promoted. As a result, production, on the books at least, increased.

Ad Corten, a Dutch fishing biologist, added that calculating such fishing stock tallies is even tougher in a place like West Africa, where virtually no one is doing the counting.

Countries in the region lack the funding to properly analyze their stocks, Corten said. Many politicians are closely aligned with fishmeal companies because there is so much money at stake - The Gambia being the worst of all, he said, explaining that the fisheries ministry barely tracks how much fish is being landed by the licensed ships, much less the unlicensed ones.

The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization has a working group focused on fishmeal in West Africa. 'But their work is basically dead,' he said. 'I know because I'm the coordinator of the group.'

Still, I wanted to know what The Gambia was doing to monitor the health of its waters. Figuring that the local government might be doing what Carten said the U.N. and other international groups were not, I contacted a fisheries officer named Amadou Jallow. He told me that though his ministry conducts no patrols of its own because it lacks boats, the Gambian government was collaborating with an international ocean conservation group called Sea Shepherd, which had surreptitiously brought a 184-foot ship called the Sam Simon to help combat illegal activity in its waters. Their goal, they told me, was to catch unlicensed foreign ships, which local fishermen had been complaining about for years were pillaging national waters. So, in August, 2019 I joined their patrol for three weeks.

The Sam Simon, named after the creator of the television show 'The Simpsons,' who donated the funds to Sea Shepherd to buy the ship, was built for aggressive pursuit. The vessel had doubly reinforced sides to carry out Sea Shepherd's controversial ramming tactics against Japanese whalers in the Southern Ocean. The ship is also ideal for patrolling, because it is unusually fast and has extra fuel capacity that allows it to stay at sea for long periods. In recent years, Sea Shepherd has been working with various African governments, including Gabon, Liberia, Tanzania, Benin and Namibia, to combat illegal fishing.

Some fisheries experts have criticized these collaborations as publicity stunts that serve to advance Sea Shepherd's fundraising goals, but its work has led to the arrest of more than 50 illegal fishing ships. They also fault the patrols as potentially shortsighted.

'While Sea Shepherd can help in the short term, it's not sustainable for countries to rely on expensive western NGOs to police their waters. They need to build in the architecture and systems of governance so they can do that for themselves,' says Steve Trent, executive director of the Environmental Justice Foundation, which has also been working with fishing communities afflicted by IUU fishing in west Africa.

The very same Gambian government that would benefit from the press surrounding its sea patrols with Sea Shepherd may also on land be ignoring violations from the same foreign fishing interests that are violating labor and environmental laws, Trent added.

Still, I was eager to find out whether they'd catch more of these scofflaw ships off the coast of Gunjur, and Sea Shepherd granted me permission to join the crew of the Sam Simon on patrol. The circle of secrecy that surrounded our mission was tight. The Sea Shepherd staff told me that barely a dozen local government officials had been informed of the patrol.

For Sea Shepherd, its work is about more than exacting justice or protecting a disappearing species of fish. It is about adding teeth to the halfhearted policing of laws on the high seas. But even calling these laws halfhearted would be giving them more credit than they were due. Offshore, laws are as murky as the watery boundaries are blurry, and most governments have neither the resources nor the interest to go chasing after illegal actors.

To avoid being spotted by fishermen, Sea Shepherd had brought in several small speed boats under the cover of darkness to a hidden dock, where they sat ready to spirit a dozen heavily armed Gambian Navy and Fisheries officers out to the Sam Simon. Joining us on board would be two Israeli private security contractors from a company called Yamasec, which was training the Gambian officers in military procedures for boarding ships, including those that refused to stop.

Sea Shepherd speedboats next to a Chinese fishing vessel in Gambian waters (Photo: Fábio Nascimento / The Outlaw Ocean Project) The mood aboard the Sam Simon was calm, even sleepy. Members of the crew spent most of their time scrubbing rust on deck and deep cleaning the mess hall, while officers on the bridge, hunched over computer screens, monitored the dozens of ships fishing or traversing Gambian waters. Meanwhile, the Israeli security contractors trained the Gambian Navy officers how to carry their weapons while climbing up rope ladders, how to check the ships for contraband, weapons or hidden workers, and how to board moving ships that refused to stop.

For the first couple of days, the Sam Simon stayed hidden, trying to avoid being spotted by any Gambian or foreign fishermen. Whenever fishing ships inadvertently approached us, as the real-time satellite images showed us, we quickly moved far outside the range of their radars or line of sight, typically a couple dozen miles or so away. The

point of this hide-and-seek game was to spring into action as soon as any fishing ship entered the forbidden zone. By the third day, however, it was clear that our cover had been blown.

On most days, dozens of foreign trawlers could be seen from land, fishing illegally inside the zone reserved for local fishermen, which stretches out nine miles from shore. Instead, the foreign trawlers were staying well outside the forbidden waters. The captain of the Sam Simon decided to change plans. Instead of focusing on the unlicensed ships near shore, the crew would begin conducting unannounced at-sea inspections of the 55 ships licensed to be in Gambian waters, most of which fish for bonga that they then sell to the local plants.

Less than an hour later, we were alongside the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010, a 134-foot trawler operated by a Chinese company called Qingdao Tangfeng Ocean Fishery. A team of Gambian officers from the Sam Simon, AK-47s slung over their shoulders, were soon scurrying up a rope ladder and hoisting themselves on deck. Nascimento and I followed close behind them. On board the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 were seven Chinese officers and 39 crew (35 Senegalese and 4 Gambians).

Most of the Africans worked below deck on a cramped production line, standing shoulder to shoulder, wearing stained and ill-fitting overalls, their arms thrashing at the silvery river of fish that sped down a conveyor belt to sort and pack them into boxes for freezing. As the Gambian officers grilled the ship's captain they also sifted through his paperwork.

A Gambian Navy lieutenant named Modou Jallow had discovered that the ship's fishing log book was blank. All captains are required to maintain log books and keep detailed diaries that document where they go, how long they work, what gear they use, and what they catch. The lieutenant had issued an arrest order for the infraction and was yelling in Chinese at Captain Qui, who was incandescent with rage. 'No one keeps that!' he shouted.

The captain was not wrong. Paperwork violations are easy to come by, especially on fishing boats working along the coast of West Africa, where countries don't always provide clear guidance about their rules. Fishing boat captains also tend to view log books suspiciously as the means to bribe officials and convince conservationists otherwise, who are fixated on closing fishing grounds.

On the other hand, the lack of proper log books goes to the heart of Gambia's problem, because they are essential to keeping track of how many fish are left in the country's waters. Scientists usually rely on biological studies, academic modeling, and mandated reports from onland fish dealers to survey the health of fish stocks. However, scientists also use log boats to assess fishing locations, gear descriptions, water depths, timelines, and 'effort' - how long nets and lines are in the ocean compared to the amount of catch.

After all, in the effort to estimate the size of Gambia's remaining bonga stock, it means one thing if a boat can land two tons of the fish in a day, and something else entirely if the job takes a week. The Navy lieutenant ordered the captain to drive his ship back to port. An hour later, the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 was en route to shore. Over the next two weeks, the Sam Simon, with the help of the private security contractors, inspected 15 foreign fishing ships licensed to fish in Gambian waters and arrested 14 of them. All but one was charged for, among other crimes, a lack of a proper fishing log book.

DETAILS

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