

The fight for west Africa's fish

Neil Munshi aboard the Bob Barker; Gambia . FT.com ; London (Mar 13, 2020).

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

Data is limited, but local fishermen and international fisheries experts report that the stock of small bottom-of-the-food-chain fish like sardinella is rapidly depleting as foreign trawlers scoop them up by the tonne to serve Chinese fishmeal factories. The ship acts as transport and crew for law enforcement and fisheries officials from five west African countries. The European Commission provided a statement in response to an interview request: "These agreements establish partnerships based on transparency, which go beyond sustainable fisheries through contributing to governance, food security; and the economic, social and environmental development of partner countries." [...]from bottom on that list was oceanic sharks.

FULL TEXT

The 5,500km coastline of west Africa is home to some of the most diverse fisheries in the world. It is also hugely economically significant –more than 7m people from Mauritania to Liberia and the tiny island of São Tomé and Príncipe rely on fishing for their livelihoods, from catching to selling to processing.

But the region is also one of the world's poorest and least monitored. Boats can pass comfortably from one nation's waters to another, confident that most countries don't have functioning navies. Illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing is rampant, with 40 per cent of fish caught illegally, the highest level of any region in the world.

Data is limited, but local fishermen and international fisheries experts report that the stock of small bottom-of-the-food-chain fish like sardinella is rapidly depleting as foreign trawlers scoop them up by the tonne to serve Chinese fishmeal factories. It means fish –staples of the west African coastal diet –end up instead feeding livestock and farmed fish half a world away.

The Bob Barker –a pale grey former Norwegian whaling ship owned by the international conservationist NGO Sea Shepherd –tends to enter these waters in darkness. It cuts an imposing figure among the rickety trawlers and colourful flat-bottomed pirogues as it hunts down illegal fishing. The ship acts as transport and crew for law enforcement and fisheries officials from five west African countries.

Rumours of its presence tend to send foreign fishing boats –from China or Turkey or Morocco –scattering to neighbouring countries' waters. But there is one type of boat that never flees from Sea Shepherd: massive European tuna vessels that dwarf the Bob Barker.

"Their boats have the best technology, their paperwork is always perfect –and they're happy to show us," says one crew member in the Bob Barker's lounge about 15 nautical miles off The Gambia. "It's like they don't have anything to hide –they can pay whatever they need to pay to have all the proper licences and documents."

Some of those fees are paid for by EU taxpayers, through the bloc's multibillion-dollar fisheries subsidy regime, part of which is meant to help the impoverished countries of west Africa thwart illegal and unregulated fishing.

The EU boasts about its role in monitoring and enforcement in the region. "The presence of the EU in these waters . . . is a fundamental contribution in the fight against IUU fishing," says Daniel Voces de Onaindi, managing director of Europêche, the Brussels-based umbrella trade body for the European fishing industry.

But critics say this legal EU fishing, conducted under agreements signed with many of the countries in the region, is as damaging as the illegal variety. Europe pays on average just 8 per cent of the total value of the fish caught in west Africa, including those fished illegally, according to research by Dyhia Belhabib, principal investigator at

Ecotrust Canada. That is only slightly more than the 4 per cent that China, widely painted as the bogeyman of Africa, pays.

“There is always this focus on China, but . . . I think that there is an urban legend of transparency around the EU fleet,” says Ms Belhabib. “The EU treats west Africa as a dumping ground for its overcapacity within its waters. They are exporting their overcapacity and . . . [barely] paying for it.”

Standing on the bridge of the Bob Barker the ship’s captain, Peter Hammarstedt, echoes that sentiment, saying the idea that the EU is doing enough is absurd. “Otherwise why would they [west African states] need us here?”

For decades, heavily subsidised boats —primarily from Spain, France, Portugal, Italy and Greece —have travelled far afield to feed Europe’s insatiable appetite for fish. About 200 of them currently ply the waters off west Africa, via what the EU calls Sustainable Fishing Partnership Agreements. The bloc has 13 such deals —nine of which are with west and central African states.

Under the agreements the EU pays a set amount annually to the host country —ranging from €600,000 in The Gambia to €61.6m in Mauritania —for a set tonnage of either small fish closer to shore that are largely sold to fishmeal factories or tuna further out at sea. The EU’s payment includes some funding for fisheries management, environmental sustainability and local industry support. But it amounts to just a small fraction of the value of the fish.

In the 1980s, the EU paid sums equivalent to a few million euros for these deals, peaking at €300m in 1997 but since settling to about €180m a year today.

The European Commission provided a statement in response to an interview request: “These agreements establish partnerships based on transparency, which go beyond sustainable fisheries through contributing to governance, food security; and the economic, social and environmental development of partner countries.”

Yet activists and academics argue that the deals are neither sustainable nor equal. While the agreements claim to both develop local fisheries and sustainably supply Europe with fish, critics say they effectively do neither. African countries are paid little for expensive tuna caught by European boats and African fishermen and consumers lose their sources of livelihood and protein to industrial trawlers.

“African countries are selling the licences far more cheaply than they should,” says Tony Long, chief executive of the NGO Global Fishing Watch. “Often African countries are left thinking they got quite a good deal, when it’s actually probably the reverse.”

Kelve Nobre de Carvalho, São Tomé and Príncipe’s attorney-general, has first-hand experience of this. As a prosecutor in 2016, he was on the island when the *Aleamar Primero*, a Spanish boat licensed to fish for tuna under an agreement the government had signed with the EU, came into port in São Tomé, weighed down by 87 tonnes of shark, a lucrative bounty likely bound for China.

São Tomé receives an annual €840,000 to allow 34 boats from the bloc to catch tuna in its waters, but when the authorities boarded the *Aleamar Primero* its hold was filled with sharks, many with their fins already removed. There wasn’t a tuna in sight.

Mr Nobre de Carvalho says the authorities looked through the EU agreement to confirm that the boat had violated its terms. On the very first page, it listed “tuna fishing” as the purpose of the agreement, but further down they saw a reference to “highly migratory species”, citing the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. Second from bottom on that list was oceanic sharks.

“No one [here] thought that a tuna agreement meant sharks . . . but they left this kind of open door for [themselves],” he says. “It’s not fair to us. [In] agreements between the EU and African countries, especially poor ones . . . they have [the] power.”

French and Spanish boats first fished off the west coast of Africa after the stock of European pilchard collapsed in the Bay of Biscay in the early 1900s. They expanded in the late 1950s, when albacore tuna started to decline in Europe. That has been a theme in west Africa: as European stocks have declined, more of the continent’s boats have headed south under fishing access agreements.

Like other commodities extracted from Africa over the centuries, fish are mostly taken raw, to be processed and

sold elsewhere. As with oil, cobalt, gold or diamonds, that leaves Africa with little to show for its wealth of resources.

The result of increased industrial fishing –by European, Chinese, Russian and other boats –has been greater insecurity in west Africa’s waters and the decline of coastal communities. Hundreds of thousands of economic migrants from coastal west Africa have pursued a new life in Europe.

In this way, the deals also directly contradict the EU’s own aims of fostering development in west Africa to curb migration from the region, says Daniel Pauly, professor at the University of British Columbia. “[One side] works on development to try to support the populations of these countries, and then there’s another branch that undermines [their] economies,” he says. “You’re almost forcing people to emigrate.”

The negotiations are inherently skewed given lopsided skillsets, colonial history and the desperate need of many countries for foreign currency and government revenue, he says. “If you’re a tiny country that exports something small like peanuts or palm oil . . . you have no way of resisting an unfair deal.”

Still, the EU has some unlikely defenders. Steve Trent, head of the UK-based Environmental Justice Foundation, says that while far from perfect, Europe’s fleet is the world’s most transparent and well-managed. He says his fellow conservationists are making “the perfect the enemy of the good”, especially compared with egregious behaviour by China –widely considered the most subsidised and voracious fleet.

“If you’re going to choose who fishes in your waters, you’re going to be much better off having the Europeans”, he says, “than some of the other fleets.”

Most distant-water fishing is only economical because it is subsidised. A study in the journal Marine Policy found \$35.4bn was paid in global fishing subsidies in 2018. Of that total the EU spent \$3.8bn –\$2bn of which went on “capacity enhancement” to allow boats to fish for longer and more efficiently, which are the subsidies most directly linked to overfishing –compared with \$7.26bn for China and \$3.43bn for the US.

Such subsidies put EU boats at an advantage and make it all but impossible for African countries to develop their own fishing fleets, says the study’s lead author Ussif Rashid Sumaila, professor at the University of British Columbia. He calculates that developed world fishermen receive \$7 in subsidies for every dollar their developing world counterpart gets.

Despite a global push to reduce subsidies, France, Spain and Italy last year urged the EU to strengthen the system. The EU has yet to respond. The bloc is continuing to push for a deal at the World Trade Organization to curb global fishing subsidies, which has been in negotiation for more than 20 years.

African governments also bear responsibility for their “sea blindness”, says Ifesinachi Okafor-Yarwood, visiting fellow at Nigeria’s National Defence College. For generations they have been focused on the precious commodities on land, she says, but they should be negotiating better fishing deals, clamping down on corruption, investing in science and working within regional fisheries organisations.

“Countries in west and central Africa . . . are gradually understanding the need to enforce maritime security and ensure maritime governance, but they’re slow to walk the talk,” she says.

Fishing’s final frontier in numbers

\$35.4bn

In global fishing subsidies in 2018. Of that total the EU spent \$3.8bn and China \$7.26bn

40%

Of all fish caught off west Africa is done so illegally –the highest level in the world

>200

Heavily-subsidised EU boats ply the waters off west Africa

Officials from The Gambia, Sao Tomé and Gabon say that without Sea Shepherd, which has helped catch scores of illegal fishing vessels, they would be unable to patrol their waters. It was also instrumental in Gabon’s decision to let its partnership agreement with the EU lapse four years ago. While taking Gabonese officials on patrols of their waters, the group found that European tuna boats had annually been catching up to 60,000 tonnes but only declaring 5,000-15,000 tonnes –and must have been for years, says Lee White, a British conservationist who is

now Gabon's environment minister.

"That's definitely not a sustainable fisheries partnership –it's more like plundering the ocean," he says. "If you look at resource exploitation in Africa, whether it's timber or in the past, oil or minerals, the model has been to rip natural resources out of Africa and to use them to develop [the] UK, Europe, America, China . . . The tuna agreement in Gabon has been exactly like that –fish cheap raw materials, take it someplace else and make money off it."

"If we're going to develop Africa, we need to kill that model and keep more of the value added on the continent," Mr White says. He adds that Gabon is negotiating a new deal with the EU to guarantee that some of the catch is processed in the country.

"If we were to land 60,000 tonnes of tuna in Gabon, we could build two factories . . .[and] create about 6,000 jobs," he says. "And we would have a more equitable share . . . between the country that owns the natural resources and the countries that have the technology to exploit them."

Crédito: Neil Munshi aboard the Bob Barker, Gambia

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