

EMPTY SEAS

## Europe Takes Africa's Fish, and Boatloads of Migrants Follow



Fishermen in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau. Overfishing has depleted once-bountiful African waters.

By SHARON LAFRANIERE Published: January 14, 2008, New York Times

KAYAR, Senegal — Ale Nodye, the son and grandson of fishermen in this northern Senegalese village, said that for the past six years he netted barely enough fish to buy fuel for his boat. So he jumped at the chance for a new beginning. He volunteered to captain a wooden canoe full of 87 Africans to the Canary Islands in the hopes of making their way illegally to Europe.

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Candace Feit for The New York Times

A young boy catching crabs at the port in Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, where fishermen who were buying more boats less than a decade ago now complain they are in debt and looking to get out of the business.

The 2006 voyage ended badly. He and his passengers were arrested and deported. His cousin died on a similar mission not long afterward. Nonetheless, Mr. Nodye, 27, said he intended to try again. "I could be a fisherman there," he said. "Life is better there. There are no fish in the sea here anymore."

Many scientists agree. A vast flotilla of industrial trawlers from the [European Union](#), China, Russia and elsewhere, together with an abundance of local boats, have so thoroughly scoured northwest Africa's ocean floor that major fish populations are collapsing. That has crippled coastal economies and added to the surge of illegal migrants who brave the high seas in wooden pirogues hoping to reach Europe. While reasons for [immigration](#) are as varied as fish species, Europe's lure has clearly intensified as northwest Africa's fish population has dwindled. Last year roughly 31,000 Africans tried to reach the Canary Islands, a prime transit point to Europe, in more than 900 boats. About 6,000 died or disappeared, according to one estimate cited by the [United Nations](#).

The region's governments bear much of the blame for their fisheries' decline. Many have allowed a desire for money from foreign fleets to override concern about the long-term health of their fisheries. Illegal fishermen are notoriously common; efforts to control fishing, rare. But in the view of West African fishermen, Europe is having its fish and eating them, too. Their own waters largely fished out, European nations have steered their heavily subsidized fleets to Africa.

"As Europe has sought to manage its fisheries and to limit its fishing, what we've done is to export the overfishing problem elsewhere, particularly to Africa," said Steve Trent, executive director of the Environmental Justice Foundation, a London-based research group. European Union officials insist that their bloc, which has negotiated fishing deals with Africa since 1979, is a scapegoat for Africa's management failures and the misdeeds of other foreign fleets. They argue that African officials oversell fishing rights, inflate potential catches and allow pirate vessels and local boats free rein in breeding grounds.

Pierre Chavance, a scientist with the French Institute for Research and Development, said both foreign fleets and African governments allowed financial considerations to trump concerns for fish or local fishermen. "One side has a big interest to sell, and the other side has a big interest to buy," he said. "The negotiations are based upon what people want to hear, not the reality." Overfishing is hardly limited to African waters. Worldwide, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that 75 percent of fish stocks are overfished or fished to their maximum. But in a poor region like northwest Africa, the consequences are particularly stark.

Fish are the main source of protein for much of the region, but some species are now so scarce that the poor can no longer afford them, said Pierre Failler, senior research fellow for the British Center for Economics and Management of Aquatic Resources. The coastal stock of bottom-dwelling fish is just a quarter of what it was 25 years ago, studies show. Already, scientists say, the sea's ecological balance has shifted as species lower on the food chain replace some above them.

In Mauritania, lobsters vanished years ago. The catch of octopus — now the most valuable species — is four-fifths of what it should be if it were not overexploited. A 2002 report by the [European Commission](#) found that the most marketable fish species off the coast of Senegal were close to collapse — essentially sliding toward extinction. "The sea is being emptied," said Moctar Ba, a consultant who once led scientific research programs for Mauritania and West Africa.

In a region where at least 200,000 people depend on the sea for their livelihoods, local investments in fishing industries are drying up with the fish stocks. In Guinea-Bissau, fishermen who were buying more boats less than a decade ago now complain they are in debt and looking to get out of the business.

“Before, my whole family could live on what we caught in one pirogue,” said Niadye Diouf, 28, whose Senegalese family sold their pirogue for \$500 to pay for an illegal — and ultimately unsuccessful — voyage to Spain. “Now even five pirogues would not be enough.”

Fishermen like Mr. Diouf argue that Africans should have first priority in their own waters — an idea enshrined in a 1994 United Nations treaty on the seas that acknowledges the right of local governments to sell foreigners fishing rights only to their surplus stocks.



Arturo Rodriguez/Associated Press

Men who were picked up at sea as they tried to flee West Africa standing on a patrol boat in Los Cristianos in Tenerife, in the Canary Islands. The decline of fishing has contributed to the flood of migrants to Europe.

But that rule has been repeatedly violated along northwest Africa’s nearly 2,000-mile coast.

Studies dating to 1991 indicated that Senegal’s fishery was in trouble. In 2002, a scientific report commissioned by the European Union stated that the biomass of important species had declined by three-fourths in 15 years — a finding the authors said should “cause significant alarm.” But the week the report was issued, European Union officials signed a new four-year fishing deal with Senegal, agreeing to pay \$16 million a year to fish for bottom-dwelling species and tuna.

Four years later, Mauritania followed suit. Despite reports that octopus were overfished by nearly a third, in 2006 Mauritania’s government sold six more years’ access to 43 European Union vessels for \$146 million a year — the equivalent of nearly a fifth of Mauritania’s government budget. “I don’t know a government in the region that can say no,” said Mr. Chavance, the French scientist. “This is good money, and they need it.”

Sid-Ahmed Ould-Abeid, who leads a Mauritanian association of small fishermen, said: “The E.U. has the money, so it has the power. It is easier to sacrifice the local fishermen.” Those sacrifices are multiplying in Mauritania. One of the few countries with a private industrial fleet, most of it jointly owned with the Chinese, it has lost one-third of roughly 150 trawlers since 1996.

Ahmed and Mohamed Cherif, whose family owns P.C.A., a fish exporting firm in Nouadhibou, say they have lost money for two years running. Their two new orange trawlers spend weeks docked in Nouadhibou’s rough-hewn harbor. “We can’t compete with the European Union,” Ahmed Cherif said as he strolled past row after row of idle pirogues. “The government should have kept this resource for Mauritians. Let these people work.”

Europe is just one foreign contributor to fish declines. Countries from Asia and the former Soviet Union also dispatched ships to ply northwest Africa’s seas. But often those fleets stay for shorter durations and without the same promises of responsible fishing and local development.

In fact, little development has taken place since the European Union signed its first fish deal with a West African nation in 1979. The huge economic benefits that come from processing and exporting the catch remain firmly in European hands. African governments either misspent or diverted the funds earmarked for development to more pressing needs, while the Europeans sometimes made only token efforts on promised projects. Nouadhibou harbor, for instance, remains littered with 107 wrecked fishing trawlers eight years after the European Union promised to clear them to help develop the port. In their defense, European officials say they moved to reform their fishing agreements in 2003 to address criticism that ship operators were overfishing and were undercutting local fishermen. Fabrizio Donatella, who heads the European Union unit that negotiates fishing deals, says the new agreements are models of responsible fishing and transparency.

“One cannot say we are not fishing the surplus or that we have not respected scientific recommendations,” he said. Ultimately, African governments must protect and manage their own resources, he said. Examples of mismanagement abound. The number of pirogues in six northwest African countries exploded from 3,000 to 19,000 in the last half-century, but Senegal and other nations have only recently begun to license them. Guinea-Bissau, a nation of 1.4 million people, is a prime example of how not to run a fishery. According to Vladimir Kacyznski, a marine scientist with the [University of Washington](#), no one has comprehensively studied the nation’s coastal waters for at least 20 years.

For two years, Sanji Fati was in charge of enforcing Guinea-Bissau’s fishing rules. When he took the job in 2005, he said, his agency did not have a single working patrol boat to monitor hundreds of pirogues and dozens of industrial trawlers, most of them foreign. An estimated 40 percent of fish were caught without licenses or in violation of regulations, and vessel operators routinely lied about their haul. Government observers were mostly illiterate, underpaid and easily bought off. Mr. Fati tightened enforcement, but said he still felt as if he was waging a one-man war. A few months ago, he left in frustration.

That bleak picture did not stop Guinea-Bissau and the European Union from agreeing last May to allow European boats to fish its waters for shrimp, fish, octopus and tuna. Over the next four years, the agreement will pump \$42 million into a government that is months behind in paying salaries and still emerging from civil war. Daniel Gomes, Guinea-Bissau’s 12th fishing minister in eight years, said he had tried to be conservative in how much access to grant foreigners, despite paltry scientific data and severe economic pressures. Still, asked whether his nation would end up with empty waters, he replied: “This prospect is not out of the question. This could happen.”

EMPTY SEAS

## Europe's Appetite for Seafood Propels Illegal Trade



Jonathan Player for the International Herald Tribune

Fish from all over the world are on display at Brixton Market in London.

By [ELISABETH ROSENTHAL](#)  
Published: January 15, 2008

### Correction Appended

LONDON — Walking at the Brixton market among the parrotfish, doctorfish and butterfish, Effa Edusie is surrounded by pieces of her childhood in Ghana. Caught the day before far off the coast of West Africa, they have been airfreighted to London for dinner.

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Ms. Edusie's relatives used to be fishermen. But no more. These fish are no longer caught by Africans.

On the underside of the waterlogged brown cardboard box that holds the snapper is the improbable red logo of the China National Fisheries Corporation, one of the largest suppliers of West African fish to Europe. Europe's dinner tables are increasingly supplied by global fishing fleets, which are depleting the world's oceans to feed the ravenous consumers who have become the most effective predators of fish.

Fish is now the most traded animal commodity on the planet, with about 100 million tons of wild and farmed fish sold each year. Europe has suddenly become the world's largest market for fish, worth more than 14 billion euros, or about \$20.6 billion a year. Europe's appetite has grown as its native fish stocks have shrunk so that Europe now needs to import 60 percent of fish sold in the region, according to the [European Union](#).

In Europe, the imbalance between supply and demand has led to a thriving illegal trade. Some 50 percent of the fish sold in the European Union originates in developing nations, and much of it is laundered like contraband, caught and shipped illegally beyond the limits of government quotas or treaties. The smuggling operation is well financed and sophisticated, carried out by large-scale mechanized fishing fleets able to sweep up more fish than ever, chasing threatened stocks from ocean to ocean.

The [European Commission](#) estimates that more than 1.1 billion euros in illegal seafood, or \$1.6 billion worth, enters Europe each year. The World Wide Fund for Nature contends that up to half the fish sold in Europe are illegally caught or imported. While some of the so-called “pirate fishing” is carried out by non-Western vessels far afield, European ships are also guilty, some of them operating close to home. An estimated 40 percent of cod caught in the Baltic Sea are illegal, said Mireille Thom, a spokeswoman for Joe Borg, the European Union’s commissioner of fisheries and maritime affairs.

“We know that it’s much too easy to land illegal fish in European ports, and we are really eager to block their access to European markets,” Ms. Thom said.

If cost is an indication, fish are poised to become Europe’s most precious contraband. Prices have doubled and tripled in response to surging demand, scarcity and recent fishing quotas imposed by the European Union in a desperate effort to save native species. In London, a kilogram of lowly cod, the traditional ingredient of fish and chips, now costs up to £30, or close to \$60, up from £6 four years ago.

“Fish and chips used to be a poor man’s treat, but with the prices, it’s becoming a delicacy,” said Mark Morris, a fishmonger for 20 years in London’s enormous Billingsgate market.

On a wintry day at 5 a.m. in Billingsgate last month, as wholesalers unpacked fresh fish from all over the world, the vast international trade that feeds Europe’s appetite was readily apparent, even if the origins of each fillet and steak were not.

Less than 24 hours before, some of these fish were passing through Las Palmas in the Canary Islands, a port with five inspectors to evaluate 360,000 tons of perishable fish that must move rapidly through each year. The Canaries, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of Morocco, have become the favored landing point of illegal fish as well as people. Once cleared there, the catch has entered the European Union and can be sold anywhere within it without further inspection. By the time West African fish get to Europe, the legal fish are offered for sale alongside the ill gotten.

“In the fish area, we’re so far behind meat where you can trace it back to the origins,” said Heike Vesper, who directs the Fisheries Campaign of the World Wide Fund for Nature. The long distances and chain of fishermen and traders make that a difficult task, and every effort to regulate catches, it seems, pushes fishing fleets to other regions. Mr. Morris, the fishmonger, said: “There are quotas in Europe, and with airfreight cheap it’s much more globalized. We don’t order ourselves; there are middlemen.”

At Billingsgate, for instance, the colorful boxes of shrimp called “African Beauty,” bearing a drawing of a beautiful woman in tribal dress, were fished off Madagascar and processed in France. “Ten years ago it was just from Britain, Norway and Iceland,” said Mr. Morris, whose family has been in the business for generations.

But many kinds of fish, like tuna, swordfish and cod, are not readily available from European Union waters anymore. In September the European Commission banned the fishing of endangered bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean for the rest of 2007. Such rules barely slow the industry. “There isn’t a market we can’t access anymore,” said Lee Fawcitt, selling tuna from Sri Lanka, salmon and cod from Norway, halibut from Canada, tilapia from China, shrimp from Madagascar and snapper from Indonesia and Senegal.

To many traders, the origin of the fish hardly matters. “We try to do something, but once it’s here, my attitude is that if it’s been caught it should be sold.” Mr. Fawcitt said. “I’d hate to see it being thrown away.”

Tracing where the fish come from is nearly impossible, many experts say. Groups like [Greenpeace](#) and the Environmental Justice Foundation have documented a range of egregious and illegal fishing practices off West Africa. Huge boats, owned by companies in China, South Korea and Europe, fly flags of convenience from other nations. They stay at sea for years at a time, fishing, fueling, changing crews and unloading their catches to refrigerated boats at sea, making international monitoring extremely difficult.

Even when permits and treaties make the fishing legal, it is not always sustainable. Many fleets go well beyond the bounds of their agreements in any case, generally with total impunity, studies, including some by Greenpeace and Environmental Justice, show. Under international law, the country where the boat is registered is responsible for disciplining illegal activity. Many of the ships fly flags from distant landlocked countries that collect registration fees, but put a low priority on enforcement.

When the Environmental Justice Foundation, which has studied the fishing industry, teamed up with a Greenpeace boat in 2006, more than half of the 104 vessels it followed off the coast of Guinea were fishing illegally, or were involved in illegal practices, the study found. Their cameras recorded boats whose names were hidden to prevent reporting; boats whose names were changed week to week, presumably so multiple boats could use a single permit; the catch from a licensed boat being offloaded in the dead of night to another vessel, so that the boat could start fishing again. "There's a big competition out there with foreign vessels, especially from China," said Moshwood Kuku, a fishmonger at Afikala Afrikane, a stall that specializes in African fish at Billingsgate. "Locals can only fish the coast."

The China National Fisheries Corporation, which first sent boats to the Atlantic in 1985, now has offices up and down the coast of West Africa, accounting for more than half its international offices. It also has a huge compound in Las Palmas. But some of those contributing to overfishing are European as well, said Rupert Howes of the Marine Stewardship Council, a fisheries conservation group. "We are allowing boats from places like France and Spain to rape and pillage West African fishing grounds," he said. The European Union spends 265 million euros per year, or almost \$400 million, to buy foreign fishing rights for its distant-water fleet.

While small local fishermen in West Africa tend to fish sustainably, large seagoing boats use practices that are dangerous to the environment, particularly the use of vast nets to trawl the sea bed. The nets destroy coral, and unsettle eggs and fish breeding grounds. They gulp up fish that cannot be sold because they are too small. Their competition decimates local fishing industries.

By the time huge mechanized vessels have thrown the unsalable juveniles back into the sea, they are often dead, bringing stocks another step closer to extinction. Of the estimated 90 million tons of fish caught worldwide each year, about 30 million tons are discarded, Ms. Vesper of the World Wide Fund for Nature said. Many experts feel that a better way to control overfishing is to end the system of flags of convenience and to improve port inspections at places like Las Palmas. But enforcement requires resources, which would probably push fish prices even higher.

The European Union is exploring the idea of requiring officials at its ports to check with officials from countries where boats are registered to make sure they are legal and have fishing rights. It is proposing to provide financial assistance for more enforcement in developing countries. In the short term, prices will be higher. Procuring genuinely sustainable fish means buying more expensive fish, or not eating fish at all. "We've acted as if the supply of fish was limitless and it's not," said Steve Trent, executive director of the Environmental Justice Foundation.

#### **Correction: January 19, 2008**

Because of an editing error, an article on Tuesday about the thriving illegal trade in fish to Europe included an incorrect conversion from euros to dollars for the value of the European market for fish. It is worth more than 14 billion euros a year, or about \$20.6 billion — not \$22 billion.