FISHING An offshore free-for-all

A major threat to future food security is posed by the uncontrolled fishing of West Africa’s rich waters, both by foreign fleets and by motorised canoes from within the region.

Tristan McConnell in Accra, Freetown and Monrovia

B rightly painted wooden fishing canoes are as much a feature of West Africa’s coastline as its crashing waves, sandy beaches and palm trees. Millions of people depend on fishing for their livelihoods and for food. National economies and foreign-exchange earnings are given a boost by vibrant fisheries industries. Yet at least one fifth of the catch is lost to illegal fishing, a problem that has been assessed by the Marine Resources Assessment Group costing up to $9bn worldwide and $1bn in Sub-Saharan Africa alone.

Old traditions of small-scale artisanal fishing, with skills passed from father to son, once ensured plentiful landings of tuna, shrimp, lobster, barracuda, grouper and snapper. But in recent years these fish-rich waters have become just as vulnerable to the over-fishing and radical depletion of fish stocks seen elsewhere in the world, whether by industrial fishing fleets from elsewhere or by small, local boats.

Many of the foreign trawlers pay licence fees and declare their catch, helping to bring in some of the 5.1m tonnes of fish caught legally off West Africa each year. Others take advantage of the lack of surveillance of the region’s waters to trawl the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Guinea illegally and with impunity.

Give a man a patrol boat

In tackling this unregulated fishing, the biggest problem faced by West African governments is that they cannot police their own waters, which stretch 200 nautical miles (370km) out to sea. The Liberian navy does not have a single boat, in Sierra Leone the fledgling navy can rarely afford fuel and even Ghana’s four navy patrol boats are clearly overstretched. The World Bank estimates that effective management of fisheries could bring in an extra $300m a year to West African nations, but with limited resources it is an impossible job.

Researchers who have managed to undertake aerial surveys report numerous cases of trawlers that hide both their names and their national flags when fishing within countries’ territorial waters. A month-long study by Greenpeace in 2006 found that of 92 trawlers spotted off the coast of Guinea-Conakry, one in ten had neither flag nor name, almost one third had no licence and close to half were fishing illegally at some time. Over two-thirds of the identified trawlers were Chinese.

Off Ghana, industrial trawlers motor in under cover of darkness to fish illegally in shallow waters less than 30 metres deep, often the same trawlers that fish legally by day. Off Liberia, they are more brazen, fishing in daylight within view of local fishermen and the helpless authorities. A US Coast Guard officer advising the government calls Liberia’s waters a “free zone. Anyone and everyone comes in and takes whatever they want”.

Asian boats, African fish

Subah Yevevuo, director of the Bureau of Fisheries in Monrovia, admits: “The problem is serious. Over $12m is lost annually to illegal fishing.”

Meanwhile, legitimate catches are worth only $10m. Much of this income is lost to “transhipment”, whereby fish are caught – sometimes legally, sometimes illegally – and transferred onto large refrigerated ‘reefers’ on the high seas. Yevevuo estimates that there are over 250 illegal boats in Liberian waters at any one time, although fewer than 50 are licensed. Most of the trawlers come from China, Korea, Spain, Portugal and Greece, while large motorised canoes also enter from Senegal and Côte d’Ivoire.

Off the coast of Sierra Leone, a quarter of the catch, worth an estimated $29m, is lost to illicit fishing. Hoping to stop this theft is the maritime wing of the army based in Freetown’s Man’s Bay. Between 2001 and 2007, as many as 65 trawlers were caught: they were either poaching illegally or breaking the rules of their licence by fishing in the wrong areas or for the wrong fish. A Chinese trawler apprehended last year caused embarrassment for the Chinese ambassador, who found it moored in the harbour when he came to launch officially the new Chinese patrol boat that had just caught it.

Lieutenant commander Saliou Kanne, captain of the patrol boat, says the aim is not to catch every illegal trawler but to make an example of a few in the hope that others will at least then pay for licences. The deputy director of the fisheries ministry, Mohamed Fofidou Sheriff, says the 70 licensed trawlers bring in $2m worth of fees, but points out that many do not bother. “Our natural resources are being poached by rogues,” adds Ishmael Tarawali, a director at Sierra Leone’s Office of National Security. “(We have) only one offshore vessel and three smaller boats. Poachers are aware of our limited capabilities, which is why they dare to come around.”

Fishing accounts for 11% of Sierra Leone’s GDP, and 200,000 people are employed in fishing, gutting, cleaning, smoking and selling. Despite its important economic role, one diplomat calls the industry “undervalued, under-resourced and under threat”.

Ghana also has a lack of capacity, with only 15 trained observers to monitor the activities of 104 licensed industrial trawlers, 13,000 canoes and numerous poachers. In a bid to combat illegal fishing, only Ghana-flagged trawlers

A mercenary approach

Realising it could not stop the poachers on its own, Liberia’s government earlier this year called the Protection and Rescue Services, run by South African ex-mercenary Cobus Claessens, to do the job for them. For the crew of a trawler fishing illegally off the coast of West Africa, the sight of Claessens’ MV Rockfish with its boarding party of ex-soldiers might well be intimidating.

The cash-strapped government of post-war Liberia could not afford the $50,000-a-month running costs, but Claessens offered a deal: the only charge during a 60-day trial period would be half of the fines levied on boats that he caught. “Nobody polices the waters, nobody stops the illegal fishing and if they do, a small brebe will see them on their way,” says Claessens. “(We are) a quick fix with two effects: stopping the illegal fishing and creating a revenue stream.”

The Rockfish caught three illegal ships in just three weeks, before Liberia’s notoriously shaky justice system put an end to the experiment when none of those caught were fined, meaning Claessens did not get his cut. He has now moved the Rockfish back to its berth in Freetown. His business partner in Monrovia says he hopes that donors may step in to fund the programme.
Fishing contributes 4.5% to Ghana’s GDP and more than 500,000 people are directly involved in the industry. Ghanaians get close to half of their animal protein from fish, on average eating 26kg of fish per year (the world average is 16kg).

Atobrah says that making this link between fishing and food security is the key to pushing the problem of illegal fishing up the political agenda. “In developing countries we’re primarily concerned with bread, butter and health, so maritime issues are in the background,” he explains.

Much more needs to be done to secure West Africa’s maritime resources for the future. John Virdin, who is putting together a regional fisheries project for the World Bank, compares illegal fishing to other, more visible natural-resource theft. “If foreign companies were going across West Africa clear-cutting forests and taking all of the timber out without paying a dime, people would be upset,” he says.

Poachers are also common. “A lot of ships hop into our territorial waters,” says Atobrah. The law allows for a fine of up to $2m for illegal fishing and the confiscation of all equipment including the ship, but the reality is that very few are ever caught. The last time the authorities actually caught an illegal foreign vessel was in 2004.

are given licences and they are fitted with transponders to track their whereabouts, but this is not foolproof. Papa Yaw Atobrah, director of monitoring, control and surveillance at the fisheries ministry in the port town of Tema, admits: “In Ghana, the primary issue is of our own vessels violating areas they are not supposed to fish in.”

T
he major species of fish along Africa’s western coasts are being fished to the maximum and some are excessively exploited. Chronic over-exploitation affects not only the species with the highest commercial value, including demersal fish (fish dwelling at or near the bottom of the sea), but is even beginning to have an impact on the less commercially valuable species like small pelagic fish (fish that travel in shoals nearer the surface of the water).

A strong indication of the trend can be seen in the fact that French and Spanish fleets, which dominate the tuna-fishing industry in the ocean waters between Morocco and Angola, recorded a 20% fall in their catches over this vast area between 1997 and 2006.

Detailed data collected by Pierre Failler of the University of Portsmouth, UK, and Didier Gascuel of the Agrocampus Rennes University, France, shows a similar trend in all species that are fished in Africa’s westernmost waters, along the coast from Morocco to Sierra Leone. They say there is an especially acute crisis in the waters off Senegal, where there are simply no demersal fish left; as a result, Senegalese fishermen now increasingly work off Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania, and 40% of Senegal’s fish exports come from these foreign waters. The researchers’ main findings are summarised below. • Richard Syngle

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<td>Cephalopods (octopus, squid)</td>
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<td>Moderate to intense over-fishing</td>
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<td>Demersal fish</td>
<td>CV, Gui, Ma, Mo, Sen, Sp</td>
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<td>CV, Mo, Neth, Sen, Sp, Ukr</td>
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<tr>
<td>Crustaceans (lobster, crab, shrimp)</td>
<td>Fr, It, Mo, Sen, Sp</td>
<td>-38%</td>
<td>Full exploitation</td>
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</tbody>
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(a) CV = Cape Verde, Fr = France, Gui = Guinea, It = Italy, Ma = Mauritania, Mo = Morocco, Neth = Netherlands, Sen = Senegal, Sp = Spain, Ukr = Ukraine
(b) ‘Moderate over-fishing’ denotes an excess of fishing but with a low loss of catches, ‘intense over-fishing’ denotes a risk that the fish stocks could collapse, while ‘full exploitation’ implies no surplus of fishing.

These figures have been drawn from data collected by current research projects including Ecost, ISTAM, Poorfish and PCEAO; the latter’s results will soon be published by the UN Environment Programme.