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Canary Current

Under threat from the super-net

By Lesa Griffith*

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Tons of octopus are exported to the far east from Mauritania each year. Nouakchott, Mauritania.

As over-fishing leads to catch restrictions in some parts of the world, government-subsidized commercial fleets are turning to the rich waters off West Africa. That is bad news for countries such as Mauritania - and for the marine environment

Nouadhibou, Mauritania: The scene in Nouadhibou, Mauritania's oldest deepwater port, resembles nothing so much as the set of a disaster movie. The bay is littered with shipwrecks, rotting boats are abandoned on the sand and the air is filled with the stench of the dead fish strewn on the beach.

Mauritania's fishing industry started only 25 years ago, when the market for copper and iron collapsed and a severe drought shattered agriculture, leaving the country desperate for revenue. But already it is in crisis - and it is not alone.

In West African waters during the past 45 years, foreign fishing fleets have caught an estimated 80 per cent of the fish taken from West African waters. The remaining 20 per cent was all the coastal nations took home, and now their share may grow smaller.

In Mauritanian waters between Nouadhibou and Puerto Naos, primary port of the Canary Islands, seven Dutch supertrawlers have been dragging their mammoth nets behind them since January. The mouths of those nets are wide enough to scoop up three Statues of Liberty laid end to end. The ships haul in an average 3,500 tons of fish in less than a month, seeking them with satellites and other high-tech methods.

The desired catch in one of the world's most productive regions consists of sardinella and horse mackerel, but one trawler landed an astounding 72,000 kilos of tuna in less than 20 days as bycatch, according to a source in Puerto de la Luz, Canary Islands, where the fleet is based.

The supertrawlers are owned by a Dutch marketing conglomerate called simply The

Group, made up of four factory trawler companies. Quota restrictions in European Union waters and unsuccessful assault on herring in US waters off New England have driven The Group's ships to one of the last fishing frontiers. The vessels are based in the Canary Islands and buy monthly fishing licences from Mauritania.

They may have the largest vessels, but the Dutch are not the only ones commercially trawling Mauritania's waters. Between 1972 and 1991, Russian Federation ships led the pack, taking 17.8 million tons of fish off Mauritania and Senegal. Japan, South Korea, and Spain take a heavy toll as well. Such distant water fleets are subsidized by their governments, but nobody takes responsibility for monitoring and enforcement to ensure the sustainability of the fish stocks they plunder.

The Group now wants to build a freezer plant at Puerto de la Luz and is seeking a Spanish government subsidy of more than US\$30 million. That sum would actually come from the European Commission's Financial Instrument for Fisheries Guidance (FIFG), which allocates funds to countries to improve their fisheries or processing facilities.

The six locally owned processing plants in Puerto de la Luz are reported to be operating at only 40 per cent of capacity, and the Dutch plan would almost certainly put them out of business. Yet the vice-president of the Canary Island government, Lorenzo Olarte, has lobbied hard to have almost all of the islands' FIFG funds go to the Dutch company, saying it would create jobs. So far he has been thwarted. The islands' fisheries counsellor, Gabriel Mato - supported by WWF, the international conservation organization, and others - has persuaded the European Commission that funds should go to local artisanal fishermen. But Olarte has vowed to find the money elsewhere.

Over the past two years the government has spent more than US\$ 8 million supporting the Canary Island artisanal fleet, with help from the European Union. Seventy new boats have come into service and, as a former government official points out, "Each of these independently owned boats supports three to four families. The Dutch fleet is affecting the fish stocks. Will the freezer plant make up for the jobs that will be lost?"

Most of the boats fishing in Mauritanian waters do so legally, but how they catch fish and how many they take are largely unmonitored. Although regulations provide for permitted fishing areas, targeted species, legal sizes, gear type, and other matter, Mauritania does not have money or manpower to enforce the laws. The result: 600,000 kilos of fish caught by commercial vessels passed through Puerto de la Luz in 1990, but by 1997 that amount had dropped by half.

In Mauritania, which earns 50 per cent of its revenue from fishing, the deputy director of the National Centre for Oceanographic Research and Fisheries, Mika Tiop, acknowledges the country needs to start evaluating its fish stocks. For the present, he says, they are good and trawlers do not encroach on artisanal waters. But he adds: "We are putting monitors on the ships. Fish support the country, that's why we're doing research now."

However, Jean Worns, a French government scientific adviser to the director of Mauritania's Banc d'Arguin National Park, says because the EU brokers fishing licenses for its distant water fleets, it should enforce control. He sees declines in species such as yellow mullet because commercial vessels are moving closer to the shore.

Banc d'Arguin - part of the Global 200 list of priority ecosystems designated by WWF - is the spawning ground for many fish species, "money in the bank" for Mauritania, as Worns puts it. But its fate is linked to The Group's freezer plant. If it goes ahead, the company plans to expand its fleet to 21 ships.

"What we need is time," says the former Canary Island official, "so we can explain the problem to the public."

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*Lesa Griffith is a freelance journalist based in New York

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