

West African Fish Biodiversity Reference Center: Ghana

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Renewable natural resources constitute major sources for socioeconomic development of all developing countries, if they can be conserved, developed and sustainably exploited. For its strategic conservation and sustainable exploitation, biodiversity has to be investigated and documented at various levels and in an internationally accepted manner. However, the human and material resources available in the developing countries are insufficient to undertake the necessary studies, while various forces continue to degrade or erode biodiversity; The obvious solution is through collaboration in research and training.

In this context, a proposal was developed for the establishment of a West African Fish Biodiversity Reference Center that will operate through partnerships among subregional institutions in West Africa, developing countries and European and other developed country institutions (e.g., Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Laboratoire d'Ichtyologie Generale et Appliquee, Paris, Musee Royale de l'Afrique Centrale, Laboratoire d'Ichtyologie, Tervuren, Belgium). The center is to be based at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) in Accra, Ghana, through CSIR's Water Research Institute.

The goal is to establish and to develop further a West Africa center where knowledge of the subregion's fish biodiversity, as resources for its people, can be continuously studied, verified, collated, documented and appropriately disseminated to all stakeholders, for educational and socioeconomic development.

The necessity and urgency for the proposed center can be summarized as follows:

- Fish and fisheries knowledge and activities constitute an important subsector in the economics of almost every African country, including those of West Africa.
- Up to the present, almost all long-term investments in knowledge acquisition, documentation and dissemination of scientific information concerning fish biodiversity and resources, in almost all of Africa, have been organized and implemented by non African governments and their scientific institutions.
- The situation is evidenced by the fact that all widely known and scientifically organized African fish collection and reference centers are in Europe (particularly in Belgium, France and the UK) and the USA.
- There is concrete evidence everywhere that foreign governments are continuously

disengaging from direct involvement of their investments and institutions from long-term fish and fisheries studies in Africa "on behalf" of African countries.

- It is essential to extend the quality and usefulness of previous work and investments in fish and fisheries resource knowledge acquisition and documentation and to do this as close to the source materials as possible.

The project's objectives are:

- To build and maintain a reference center for West African freshwater and brackishwater fishes through collaborative research and training programs;
- To train West African scientists in systematics and biodiversity research approaches and in the application of the knowledge and skills acquired, so as to contribute to conservation and sustainable exploitation strategies;
- To establish long-term relationships between developed country institutions and the center;
- To encourage studies on fish as a major resource in the region;
- To enhance knowledge on biodiversity to contribute to the conservation of genetic resources for the development of aquaculture and culture fisheries; and
- To develop and establish local, subregional, and regional networks among African institutions for the study of fish biodiversity, its conservation and sustainable exploitation.

The center will strive to be:

- A dynamic place for research and learning and a reference point for the study on West African freshwater and brackishwater fishes. It will provide a place where fish biological diversity will be studied at various levels. Collections and materials will be available for researchers or students involved in systematics (morphological, biochemical and molecular studies), biology, ecology, life history studies and ethology.
- An education support center, encouraging active study of West African fishes.
- A source of information, with moral respon-

sibility to disseminate verified information, "in appropriate forms, to appropriate governmental organizations, institutions and other users. It is envisaged that information from the center will contribute to the development of strategies for sustainable exploitation of fish genetic resources in fisheries, aquaculture, the aquarium trade and other sub sectors of the economy.

- A dynamic center for dissemination of knowledge to the public, recognizing that for long-term conservation and sustainable use of fish resources, children and the general public must be informed and involved. This will be approached through exhibitions, appropriate media communication channels, posters and special articles in the popular press. This reflects our belief that only those who are aware of what exists are the ones who can adopt attitudes and actions for the wise use of available resources.

Discussion

Dr. Pullin: This project might consider including the establishment of an aquarium that school children and the general public can visit. This facility could make some small profit, which can be ploughed back.

Dr. Abban: It is an idea that is already in the proposal.

Dr. Folack: I want to congratulate Dr. Abban for this effort. This center is certainly needed.

Dr. Agnese: I would like to see tissue samples included in the proposal, for genetic studies. I also wish to suggest that you open a small door to East Africa. This will be mutually beneficial because something in this direction has also started in Nairobi, Kenya.

Dr. Abban: There are already some interactions and we will certainly open our doors to them and collaborate with them when we get the center established.

Dr. Teugels: I think it is important that this center be established in Africa. The European museums have not planned for staffing to continue this work in the long-term.