

The scourge of saiko: illegal fishing in Ghana

Ghana is known as a fishing nation but its marine fisheries are in steep decline with heavy consequences on food security and livelihood.

Illegal fishing practices related mainly to Chinese operators worsen the situation.

Steve Trent and the EJF plead for an effective enforcement of the law by the Ghanaian government.

Grain de Sel (GDS): Can you present the fishery sector in Ghana and its contribution to food security?

Steve Trent (ST): Ghana's marine fisheries are in steep decline. Decades of over-exploitation by both the small-scale canoe and industrial fleets have pushed the populations of some key species, such as sardinella, to the brink of collapse. Other important species (sea breams, groupers, snappers and octopus), are considered severely overfished. The status of small pelagic stocks (sardinellas, anchovy and mackerel) is of particular concern because of their role in food security and livelihood provision.

Ghana has one of the largest small-scale fishing fleets in West Africa. The artisanal sector employs around 80% of fishers in the country, with over 11,500 canoes and 107,500 fishermen operating along the coast. The mainstay of Ghana's fishing communities is the small pelagic fishery. This includes the Sardinella aurita (Round Sardinella), Sardinella maderensis (Flat Sardinella), Engraulis encrasicolus (European Anchovy) and Scomber colias (Atlantic Chub Mackerel).

Ghana's fisheries are a primary source of income for 186 coastal villages, providing livelihoods for around 10% of the population, and food security for the nation.

Sardinella populations have crashed in recent years, from peak landings of around 140,000 metric tonnes in the early 1990s, to annual landings of around 20,000 tonnes between 2011 and 2016.

GDS: Can you tell us about the phenomenon of illegal "saiko" fishing?

ST: "Saiko" is a severely destructive form of illegal fishing, where industrial trawlers target

the staple catch of Ghanaian canoe fishers and sell this fish back to local communities for a profit. The catches are transferred by the trawlers in frozen blocks to specially adapted "saiko" canoes out at sea.

In 2017, approximately 100,000 tonnes of fish were landed through saiko. This means just 40% of trawler catches were landed legally and reported to the government that year. When these illegal and unreported catches are taken into account, estimated landings of the 75 or so trawlers fishing in Ghana were similar in magnitude to the landings of the entire artisanal fishing sector.

shers and a crucial part of the Ghanaian diet. Unless ambitious action is taken, scientists estimate that these stocks could collapse as early as next year. In a recent assessment, FAO recommended the complete closure of the sardinella fishery shared between Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo and Benin to allow fish populations to recover.

In addition, much of the saiko catch is juvenile fish – over 60% of fish analysed from October 2018 - April 2019, EJF's report found. Harvesting at this early stage can severely impact the capacity of Ghana's fish stocks to replenish.

The saiko catches in 2017 were worth US\$ 40.6 - 50.7 million when sold at sea, and US\$ 52.7 - 81.1 million when sold at the landing site, the report estimates.

SARDINELLA POPULATIONS HAVE CRASHED IN RECENT YEARS

The trawlers themselves are run almost exclusively by Chinese operators, who use Ghanaian 'front' companies to bypass laws forbidding foreign ownership or control of industrial trawl vessels flying Ghana's flag. The Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF) has revealed that over 90% of industrial trawlers licensed in Ghana are linked to Chinese ownership.

These industrial boats are able to catch vast quantities of small pelagic fish such as sardinella – the main catch of the local canoe fi-

GDS: What are the economic, social and environmental consequences of illegal fishing in Ghana?

ST: Illegal fishing, and especially saiko, threatens Ghanaian fisheries and with them, food security and livelihoods.

The implications of the imminent collapse of Ghana's small pelagic fishery cannot be over-stated. 186 coastal villages rely on fisheries as their primary source of income, with limited alternative sources of livelihood or employment. The past 10-15 years have seen the average annual income per artisanal canoe drop by as much as 40%. Should the resource disappear, mass migration and social upheaval can be considered a very real prospect.

The specially built 'saiko canoes' that take the fish from the trawlers back to ports carry 450 times the average catch of the fishing canoes. Around 83 saiko canoes were



Artisanal fishing employs for 80% of the country's fishermen.



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in operation in 2017, landing an estimated 100,000 tonnes of fish that year. While canoe fishing offers direct employment for around 60 fishers for every 100 tonnes of fish, saiko means only 1.5 jobs per 100 tonnes – 40 times fewer.

GDS: What kind of measures, such as penalties for perpetrators, is the Ghanaian government undertaking to tackle the issue?

What should be done to secure sustainable fisheries in the country?

ST: The transhipment of fish from trawlers to canoes at sea is illegal under Ghanaian law, attracting a fine of between US\$ 100,000 and US\$ 2 million. The minimum fine increases to US\$1 million where these catches involve juvenile fish or the use of prohibited fishing gears.

Recently a trawler was fined the full US\$ 1 million after being caught with at least 13.9 tonnes of 'small pelagic' fish on board, the majority juveniles, along with illegal nets. However, this is the first time that the full fine has been imposed on an industrial trawl vessel, and since the Act came into force other perpetrators have paid lower sums despite the law.

Since this fine was imposed, landings by saiko canoes have continued at the major saiko port of Elmina in Ghana's Central Region. Operators continue to act with impunity, despite saiko being illegal under Ghana's fisheries laws and its devastating impacts on coastal communities. Since the beginning of October 2019, between 5 and 10 saiko canoes have landed fish daily at Elmina, carrying up to 44 tonnes of fish in a single trip.

What is needed now is the immediate, effective and transparent enforcement of the law by the Ghanaian government. Cases must be prosecuted transparently through the court process, the minimum fine in the legislation must be imposed and the outcomes of cases published on the Ministry's website. Strong penalties must be applied to create a deterrent and prove that this government means to end saiko fishing for good. ■

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Steve Trent is the executive director of the Environmental Justice Foundation (EJF), a UK-based organisation working internationally to address threats to environmental security and their associated human rights abuses.

TO KNOW MORE:

Report, China's hidden fleet in West Africa, A spotlight on illegal practices within Ghana's industrial trawl sector, Environmental Justice Foundation, 2018.