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Burgeoning coastal populations and increased global demand for African fish products is putting the continent's marine ecosystems under pressure.

By CLAIRE ATTWOOD

Ten years ago, South Africa took the unprecedented step of cancelling its long-held fisheries agreement with the Republic of China (Taiwan) and Japan, announcing that it would encourage the development of a South African longline fishery for tuna. The 25-year-old fisheries agreements had allowed as many as 100 Japanese and Taiwanese longline fishing boats to follow migratory schools of tuna into South African waters at certain times of the year.

Although the development of a South African longline fishery has largely failed to materialise, there have been other benefits for the country. For example, the local handline and pole fisheries for tuna modernised and developed new markets for yellowfin tuna; and both fisheries use gear that is less damaging to the environment than longliners (responsible for snagging seabirds, turtles and sharks, among others).

Moreover, there has been little, if any, drop-off in the economic benefits the foreign fishing fleets brought to Cape Town. Japanese and Taiwanese longliners fishing for tuna on the high seas (outside South Africa's 200 mile territorial waters) have continued to make use of Cape Town's comprehensive channelling and ship maintenance services. Although South Africa could well afford to forego the annual fee paid by Japan and Taiwan for access to its waters, fisheries agreements remain an important source of revenue for many African countries. For example, the EU currently holds seven tuna agreements and five multi-species catch agreements with African countries.

The agreements with Mauritania and Morocco are by far the most comprehensive. This year Mauritania will earn US$107 million in fishing fees for the licensing of 22 tuna seiners, 22 longliners and several shrimp- and bottom-fishing vessels from the EU, mostly Spain. Morocco licenses approximately 137 European vessels per year for a fee of around US$92 million. The vessels catch a range of different species – from sardines to tuna.

Much has been said about the European fisheries agreements with African countries. On the one hand, tuna is a highly migratory species and the fisheries agreements allow the industrialised fishing fleets of Europe and Asia to follow tuna schools into the territorial waters of African countries.

In most cases, the countries issuing the licenses do not have the kinds of fishing fleets that are necessary for catching, preserving and marketing high-quality tuna products, the fisheries agreements earn revenue from fish that might otherwise go uncaught.

On the other hand, the EU fisheries agreements have been accused of depleting fish stocks, competing unfairly with local fishing fleets and worsening the food crisis in West Africa. In most cases, fisheries agreements are poorly monitored and there are few incentives for foreigners to fish responsibly.

As a result, overfishing and the dumping of small fish and unwanted by-catch species are common. In one study, trawlers fishing
for octopus off Mauritania and Senegal were found to discard 72% and between 60–75% of their catch, respectively.

The system of African countries selling fishing rights to industrialised fishing nations may be flawed, but the problem of illegal, unregulated or unreported (IUU) fishing is arguably greater.

For example, in 2009 a group of researchers from the British Marine Resources Assessment Group (MRAG) suggested that total catches in West Africa are approximately 40% higher than reported catches. This is not an isolated problem, IUU fishing is a global issue: the MRAG researchers estimated that global losses to IUU fishing are between US$9 billion and US$24 billion annually, representing between 11 and 26 million tons of fish.

MRAG researchers found that there has been a steady increase in IUU fishing off the west coast of Africa in the last 20 years. This is a large area (Morocco to Angola) that includes many coastal nations, a wide variety of fisheries and complex management requirements.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN, about 2 million of Ghana’s 22 million people are involved in fishing, either as fishers, processors or traders. Ghana manages an artisanal fishery comprising 120,000 people who use small boats and
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unsophisticated technology to catch, process and sell fish in coastal areas, as well as an important industrial fishery.

According to MRAG researchers, the underlying causes of illegal fishing are a continued demand for fish and a lack of control over fishing activities, both by the governments of distant-water fishing nations and the coastal states in which they fish.

The highest levels of illegal fishing are associated with high-value species. South Africa’s experience with its indigenous abalone, which is widely prized for its resemblance to Japanese abalone, is testimony to this observation. Only 15 years ago the industry harvested 600 tons of wild abalone a year, but rampant overfishing, coupled with environmental anomalies, has reduced the legal catch to 75 tons per year.

The Institute for Security Studies (ISS) notes that one of the factors preventing African countries from properly controlling fishing in their territorial waters is the modest capacity of the continent’s naval assets. Shrinking defence budgets and a lack of political interest in maritime defence have left African navies and coastguards in a state of disrepair.

According to the ISS, there are only five frigates, seven medium-range patrol aircraft and 18 short-range coastal patrol craft currently operated by sub-Saharan African nations. These are required to patrol a coastline of 7.8 million square kilometres.

But the ISS does not suggest that African nations are doing nothing to protect their valuable marine fisheries.

A project co-ordinated by SADC between 2001 and 2006, saw the countries of the region successfully collaborating to carry out cross-border fisheries patrols, train and equip
Climate change is expected to have serious impacts on marine ecosystems and urgent action is needed to safeguard a vital and irreplaceable source of food.