

“HOPE IN WEST AFRICA SHIP TOUR”

An expedition of hope:

This spring, the Greenpeace ship ‘Esperanza’ and its crew set course to West Africa to document the beauties of these rich waters, and bear witness to a growing threat to food security from decades of overfishing. Millions of West Africans depend on eating and catching fish to survive. But rapid growth of fishing fleets from Africa and abroad is making it harder than ever before for local communities and fishermen to catch enough fish to uphold a living. Also, it drives up prices on local markets where less fish are available.

Greenpeace has kept an eye on the downwards spiral for more than fifteen years, and helped document the consequences of overfishing and illegal fishing in the region. Since 2001 Greenpeace ships have visited West Africa to spotlight what is at stake, and engaged in discussions about solutions to the problem of overfishing. Now the ‘Esperanza’ is back to further document the situation at sea, support African communities’ fight for healthy oceans, and engage in political debates on how to turn the tides and avoid exhaustion of the very fish resources, West Africa depend on.

As an important part of the ship tour, the ‘Esperanza’ will engage in day- and night-time joint surveillance with West African authorities from selected countries, that are part of the Sub Regional Fisheries Commission (SRFC). The aim is to help support West African, coastal countries in protecting their waters and highlight the need for efficient management as well as strict enforcement of fisheries law.

On 23rd February 2017, the ‘Esperanza’ arrived in the port of Praia, Cape Verde. From here, the ship will sail the waters of West Africa and visit ports in Mauritania, Guinea Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Senegal.

Overfishing West Africa - a threat to food security

The Atlantic Ocean and its adjoining West African waters are among the most fertile in the world. Due to upwelling, nutrient rich waters are brought to the surface resulting in a strong foundation for beautiful and plentiful marine life.

A wide range of commercially popular fish species and seafood like shrimps, octopus, squids, cuttlefish, sole, sea bass, red snapper, sardines, sardinella, and tuna feed people all over West Africa or find their

way to dinner tables in China and Europe - the two main markets outside West Africa for fish and seafood from this region.

However, due to decades of overfishing, illegal fishing and lack of fisheries management in this region, the situation is now getting out of control. What is at stake is food security for millions of people in West Africa as well as the future of an environmental hotspot.

The Chinese are the biggest players with more than 300 Chinese fishing vessels and counting in the region. Most of them are trawlers - including bottom trawlers, one of the most destructive, industrial fishing methods. There is also an increase of fish caught for fishmeal purposes only to feed pigs, fish in aquacultures and other animals on the other side of the world.

Europe is the second biggest, foreign player in West African waters with over 100 fishing vessels from the European Union as well as some vessels from Russia. Like the Chinese, many of these fleets are bottom trawlers, but large super trawlers catching huge amounts of small, pelagic fish like sardine, sardinella, and horse mackerel are also well represented. In addition, French and Spanish tuna purse seiner vessels are numerous. Some tuna purse seine fishers set their nets on floating debris or on man-made 'fish aggregating devices' (FADs). These attract a range of fish, including tuna, sharks, turtles and marine mammals as they come to feed and shelter at the FAD. The usage of FADs are also linked to high levels of bycatch of juvenile tuna and other marine life.

It is estimated that [fish products of a total value of 874 million euro were imported in 2016](#) from West African countries (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo) to EU countries.

However, both foreign vessels as well as a rapidly growing, African fishing industry are fishing at unsustainable rates that threatens biodiversity and food security for the West African population. According to data from 2016, about 200 locally flagged vessels are operating in West African waters. The majority are bottom trawlers.

Despite massive pressure on fish stocks and the environment from expanding fleets, there is a serious lack of a solid, national and regional management plan to regulate fishing activities. The failing management systems and policies means no one knows how much fish are there, how large the uptake is, and how many tons of fish can be taken out while at the same time ensuring the health of stocks for generations to come. A large number of non transparent deals between fishing companies makes it even more difficult to obtain solid data on fishing activities in this region.

Another important factor is the presence of pirate vessels. These vessels are fishing illegally and their landings are poorly registered. Illegal fishing in West African waters covers illegal transshipment, fish laundering, fishing without license, several vessels using the same license, wrong mesh size, excessive or prohibited by-catch, unauthorized catch or fishing gear, and prohibited zones/season. There is a lot of uncertainty about the amount of money lost due to illegal fishing activities each year, but estimates range from hundreds of millions euro to over a billion euro.

Bottom line is, no one exactly knows how much fish is out there, and how much of it is being caught - legally or illegally.

Despite the large information gaps, there are a few solid data available on the health of the marine life in West African waters. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) concludes, that the majority of all small, pelagic stocks in West Africa's waters are either [fully exploited or overexploited](#). For demersal resources almost half were fished at biologically unsustainable levels last year. [FAO's review](#) of the state of world marine fishery resources from 2011 showed, that this region had the highest rate of overfished stocks already back in 2009. More specifically, 54% of all analysed stocks that year were overexploited.

What is the solution?

West African governments need to set up a system for regional management. A first step could be to set up fisheries management powers within the fishery Committee for the Eastern Central Atlantic (CECAF).

West Africa is one of the last remaining places in the world without regional fisheries management in place. Although such a system cannot solve every challenge for the health of our oceans and marine life, it does ensure a minimum of cooperation between states with shared oceans and fish resources. In West Africa this is totally absent.

Greenpeace is campaigning for an effective, regional sustainable management of West-African fisheries. The idea is to unlock a situation that will eventually have devastating consequences for people all over West Africa, unless decision makers in this region act now and are supported by large foreign nations fishing in their waters. This implies a regional approach where actors from a larger group of countries are involved. Within the regional management system, research is urgently needed on the amount of fish available and what quantities can be taken out in a sustainable way. The fish resources hereafter needs to be shared fairly between relevant African countries, and the interests of the local population as well as the long term health of the oceans, must be a main priority.

In order to ensure an exploitation of marine resources that is both environmentally sustainable and socially equitable, African coastal States should adopt fisheries legislation based on a long term vision and the following fundamental principles:

- The precautionary approach and the ecosystems-based approach;
- The participation and consultation of all stakeholders including civil society;
- Transparency

African coastal States should also provide for:

- Objectives which are clear and quantifiable to maintain stocks at levels well above those capable of producing the Maximum Sustainable Yield;
- A mechanism to evaluate the success of management measures which ensures that corrective measures are adopted in a timely manner to stop or prevent over-exploitation and fleet over-capacity;
- A system to effectively manage fishing capacity (including vessel type, equipment used, and

- practices);
- An allocation mechanism based on transparent and equitable environmental and social criteria, and granting preferential access to operators who fish in the most environmentally, socially beneficial and equitable manner;
 - Strict and effective monitoring, control, surveillance and enforcement mechanisms, with the technical capacity to handle electronic data in real time, including vessel tracking, catch data, and so on. These mechanisms should be supported by dissuasive and non-discriminatory sanctions and penalties.

The EU also has a great responsibility as the second biggest player in West African waters and must take the most progressive position in their foreign fishing policy. The current reform of the FAR (the regulation that looks after EU fishing vessels fishing outside European waters) cannot be weakened and must set high standards for European fishing vessels. Also, the EU should demand good data and transparency to ensure realistic analysis of the surplus, that can be fished by European vessels. Without a good estimate of surplus, EU vessels cannot fish in West African waters according to European policies. Europe has a responsibility for demanding better regional management.

China needs to adopt stronger Distant Water Fleet (DWF) regulatory framework based on stricter sustainability principles and objectives. Meanwhile, DWF subsidies must be reformed in order to promote healthy development and an industry, that can sustain healthy oceans. This is not only for a better alignment of Chinese DWF operations in Africa with Sino-Africa mutual-benefit partnership, but also crucial steps for China to become a truly responsible fishing country globally.

How will we conduct the patrols:

During the joint patrols with coastal states in West Africa, authorities from relevant countries will be onboard the 'Esperanza'. This will make it possible to engage in official arrests and follow up research in cooperation with authorities on land, that can take action when illegal activities are encountered. To be able to find relevant vessels, a Greenpeace research team is keeping an eye on the number of vessels allowed to fish in the region. The team is also looking at national fisheries laws and regulations, prohibited areas as well as a number of tracking possibilities (like AIS) that gives a rough overview of vessels encountered from real time as well as historical data.

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