



Gambians Fight Chinese Fishmeal Factory as Fish Prices Soar, Stocks Fall



by **Nosmot Gbadamosi** July 12, 2018

Fishers returning to the village of Tanji in The Gambia. Eva Mårtensson / Getty Images.

As foreign-owned fishmeal factories proliferate in West Africa to supply feed for overseas aquaculture operations, prices for a key staple of the local diet are skyrocketing and Gambian fishers find it increasingly hard to compete against industrialized trawlers.

GUNJUR, GAMBIA – Edrissa Sackh stands on Gunjur beach, a small frown developing on his face as he mends his net. The remote fishing town of 25,000 people overlooks the North Atlantic Ocean, where Sackh, 31, has been fishing for 16 years. “They are taking the fish,” he says with bated breath, pointing toward two Chinese mechanized fishing vessels in the sea. “Right now there are no fish and we need fish.”

A few inches away, his small hand-painted wooden canoe sits idle. Strong winds mean “there can be no fishing today,” he explains. But the trawlers he sees in the distance can handle such weather. “Their boats are big industrial ones, not like ours.”



Edrissa Sackh and his captain Abdulai Camara mend their fishing net on Gunjur beach. These small-scale fishermen catch the majority of fish critical to food security. (Nosmot Gbadamosi)

When fishers aren’t taking to the sea, they, villagers and fish traders are taking to the streets. Ongoing protests have hit Gunjur since Golden Lead, a Chinese-owned fishmeal factory,

opened in 2016. The community is suing the company over pollution generated by the facility. Ten protesters have been arrested and put on trial over the past two months.



Golden Lead has faced repeated clashes with locals who accuse the factory of pollution and unfair competition. (Nosmot Gbadamosi)

Gunjur is an hour's drive from Gambia's capital of Banjul, along a stretch of open road and winding tracks with few cars. Fishing is the cornerstone of life here. The beach is a backdrop to a parade of fish sellers, fish driers, fish smokers, net menders, boat builders and boat painters. Every so often, fishers sing together as they pull their boats ashore. But these days it is harder to catch fish. "There are too many engines in the sea," says Sackh.

Villagers had hoped Golden Lead would deliver jobs to an area reliant on tourism. It did for some, but at a cost for many. The factory processes shad, a Gambian food staple known locally as bonga fish, into animal feed for export to China.

The importance of bonga fish cannot be overemphasized in Gambia, a nation of 2 million people. Gambians consume 25kg (55 lbs) of fish per capita compared to an African average of 8.2kg (18 lbs). More than half of Gambian fishers' small pelagic catch is bonga, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and makes up a third of total artisanal catch. About 90 percent of that goes to local consumption, "which is today jeopardized by the presence of more profitable alternatives such as fishmeal," says Dyhia Belhabib, a fisheries scientist at the nonprofit group Ecotrust Canada.





“It’s the cheapest,” echoes Mustapha Manneh, a 27-year-old Gambian journalist. Manneh is campaigning through his Facebook page, Kartong Weekly News, against JXYG, the Mauritania-owned and Chinese-run fishmeal factory in his village of Kartong. With almost half of Gambians living below the international poverty line of \$1.25 a day, “many people depend on this fish,” he says.

But bonga is increasingly unaffordable. Prices paid in the Gambian currency, the dalasi, have soared up to 50 percent for bonga and sardinella, according to a 2017 [report on fishmeal factories in Gambia and Senegal](#) issued by the Senegalese group Association for the Promotion and Empowerment of Marine Fishers, along with local groups from Gambia and Mauritania.

The rising tension in Gunjur is indicative of growing conflicts over fish all along the West African coast. Since the 2000s, foreign fishmeal factories operating under local flags have been multiplying, according to a January 2018 [report](#) released by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers. In Senegal there are a dozen, Mauritania has 29 and in Gambia, three have begun operations since 2016.

Fewer Fish

As the Gunjur protests grew, demonstrations also broke out in the villages of Sanyang and Kartong, where other fishmeal factories operate.

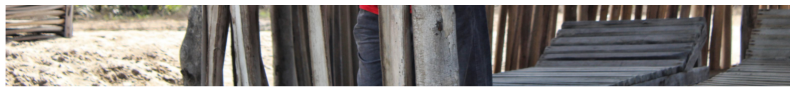
The factories produce fishmeal for Europe and Asia but outcompete local fish markets, weakening food security, says Ahmed Diamé, oceans campaigner at Greenpeace Africa. “The availability of small pelagic [fish] in the market is really decreasing, which is a real concern. It is morally unacceptable that so we can feed other fish and pigs, we take fish needed to be consumed by people.”

Golden Lead, however, pays cash upfront to local fishers for bonga and sardinella, unlike local fishmongers who buy on credit. With the unprecedented demand for bonga, many fishers like Sackh raised their price. “Even when the fish is spoiled the factory can buy it,” notes Sackh.

The bonanza didn’t last long. A year after the factory opened, Golden Lead deployed two Gambian-flagged trawlers to catch bonga and other fish. That prompted Sackh and fellow fishers to join the local furor. “Things are more expensive and the contracts are bad for us when they fish,” he says.

“In order for them to stop the market paying a higher price, they said they had to bring in their own trawlers,” says local activist Lamin Jammeh, head of Environmental Concern Group Gunjur. “After that they start buying from local fishermen again, but they are still here using their trawlers. So many people cannot afford to buy meat; they cannot afford to buy eggs. This is the only source of protein we have.”





Lamin Jammeh looks out onto the North Atlantic Ocean. The environmental activist is head of Environmental Concern Group Gunjur which along with other local groups has brought a civil lawsuit against Golden Lead fishmeal factory on behalf of residents. (Nosmot Gbadamosi)

Golden Lead denies outcompeting local fish sellers. “We never made a promise to employ locals, but we have 80-something local workers,” says Leo Huang, a manager at Golden Lead. “From the beginning to now we’ve helped Gunjur with 3.2-something million dalasi [\$63,000]. We helped with the school, and every year we fix the road.”

Peter Zhu, another manager at Golden Lead, says, “We don’t know the people here and so sometimes we only see these complaints on Facebook.”

Lamin Samateh, a senior environmental inspector at the Gambia National Environment Agency (NEA), says the higher pricing offered by Golden Lead has led to wastage. “Because the company buys at a slightly higher price, most of the suppliers want to bring their stuff to the company,” Samateh says. “They can only buy a certain amount at the end of the day because they don’t have enough storage facilities to keep excess. Some of these products get rotten and they cannot be used, so some suppliers would ... dump this fish in the ocean.”



He says the NEA acted when allegations of pollution were reported in 2017: “When we temporarily closed the factory, the people that were advocating for the plant to be allowed to resume operation were fishermen because the income they were getting had been affected by the closure.”

The NEA settled its own case against Golden Lead out of court last July. “An environmental impact assessment was conducted,” says Samateh. “When we give approval we carefully study to make sure that the plan is adequate.”

“The agency is not responsible for price regulation. That is under other agencies such as the competition commission,” he adds.

The Ministry of Trade that oversees Gambia’s Competition Commission did not respond to requests for comment.

Feeding Animals, Not People

More than half of all fish eaten globally are farmed, mostly fed on fishmeal rich in omega-3 and on oil made from small wild-caught pelagic fish. The long-held assumption was that species like anchovy, sardine and bonga were trash fish that nobody wanted to eat. That, of course, isn’t the case in Gambia, and such fish can serve as a rich source of protein, according to a 2017 study from the Sea Around Us initiative at the University of British Columbia.

That’s largely a reflection of market demand in developed nations, and now in rapidly developing countries. “They are very nutritious. It’s just people don’t like to eat anchovies,

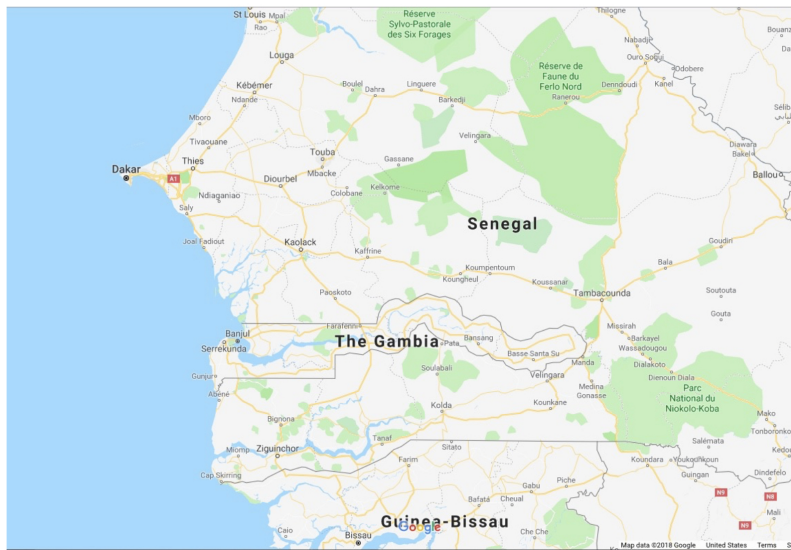
sardines and herrings,” says study lead author, a research assistant at Sea Around Us, of forage fish. “We prefer those high-level predator fish like salmon and tuna.”

“And as we choose to farm those fish instead, we needed to come up with that fishmeal supply from somewhere,” he adds.

Currently that place is Peru. The world’s largest anchovy fishery exports the majority of its production to China. The world’s biggest aquaculture producer, China, imports around a million metric tons of fishmeal annually. But Peruvians used to eat anchovies until the advent of the fishmeal industry, Cashion notes.

Even industrially raised chickens are supplemented with fishmeal. “That is because we can grow them to market at a faster rate,” says Cashion.

Northwest Africa’s rich waters increasingly supply a growing demand for fishmeal. Fish stocks in these waters are shared among countries because small pelagic fish migrate from Senegal and Gambia each summer into Moroccan waters, says Belhabib of Ecotrust Canada. “They form one of the richest marine fisheries in the world.”



“The [Sahel] upwelling brings nutrients to the surface and this has increased fish biodiversity, particularly pelagic, and add to that weak monitoring and law enforcement and you have a perfect recipe for foreign fishing,” she adds.

But rampant industrial fishing has already fully exploited stocks, Belhabib notes. Bonga is overexploited, according to the FAO, with catches declining almost 40 percent between 2013 and 2014. The slump will likely continue. To compete with foreign trawlers, Senegalese fishers have built bigger boats. “You have huge pirogues coming from Senegal fishing in Gambia’s waters and heading back, which also has an impact on those stocks,” says Diamé.



Fresh bonga waiting to be processed on Gunjur beach, The Gambia. Bonga stocks are overexploited according to the FAO. (Photo credit: Nosmot Gbadamosi)

The Gambian government says the industrial fishing sector is largely foreign-controlled but locally flagged. That fleet lands 90 percent of its catch in Senegal or transfers it at sea onto vessels bound for Europe, according to a 2014 paper issued by Interpol.

Higher-value fish such as tuna are exported to the EU, Asia and North America. Local fishers catch the affordable pelagic fish – bonga and sardinella – that is consumed in the country. A Gambian government ban on industrial licenses, enforced in 2015, failed to curb foreign exploitation, mainly by the EU, according to Belhabib, and was lifted last March.

Béatrice Gorez, coordinator of the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements, a group that lobbies for the rights of African artisanal fishers, says governments believe they can mitigate foreign exploitation through the employment and demand generated by fishmeal factories. But she says that's a devil's bargain. "It's really important for coastal states in West Africa like Gambia to realize that it's not possible to attract investment to develop industries at the expense of fishing communities," she says. "If you do that, you are going to basically screw up the food security."

Chinese Competition

One consequence: The jobs of women who process and prepare fish for local consumption are being affected by the diversion of bonga to supply overseas aquaculture operations.

"We don't get nothing from there," laments fish processor Istatou Ndura as she faces the walls of Golden Lead.



On a good day Ndura, 34, used to make 150 dalasi, or just over \$3, selling salted bonga. But over the past year, that price has fallen to less than a dollar.

Why? Because she buys her fish when it is less fresh and cheaper, putting her in direct competition with the factory.

"Every time we are making a loss," Ndura says angrily. "If you want the fish they [fishers] say, no, they will take it to the Chinese because it's more money for them. And we are working for our children. It has been our trade for generations."

Abdulai Camara, a 42-year-old local fisher, admits things are fraught. “The price is better with the Chinese on a day like today, when there is hardly any fish. We can sell it at around 500 to 800 dalasi (\$17) per basket of bonga and sardinella.” The usual price is 350 dalasi, or just over \$7.

Fish smoker Adi Jobe, 39, has resorted to buying imported frozen fish at the cash-and-carry store. “I have nine children to feed,” she says. “It’s better than going to the fishermen and competing with the Chinese.”

“We want foreign investment, but it needs to benefit the community,” says Jammeh of Environmental Concern Group Gunjur. “That fish is our source of protein. How is that still going to be possible when this factory is processing 500 tons every day and one in Kartong and another in Sanyang?”

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Study: Do Coral Reef Reserves Protect Ocean Life? Yes, But....

With data from 1,800 tropical coral reefs, new research weighs in on an ongoing conservation debate: whether it’s better to preserve marine areas that are still pristine or those that need the most protection.

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A monk seal swimming over a coral reef in Hawaii. NOAA/PIFSC/HMSRP

FROM 2004 TO 2013, scientists donned snorkeling and diving gear to survey the marine life of nearly 1,800 tropical coral reefs.

The **findings** from these extensive field surveys, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, provide new insight into an ongoing debate over the effectiveness of marine reserves and how best to use resources to protect and restore ocean life.

“Part of the [conservation] community says remote wilderness areas are fundamentally different than managed systems near people and need to be protected,” said **Joshua Cinner**, lead author on the paper and a research fellow and chief investigator at the **Australian Research Council Centre of Excellence for Coral Reef Studies** at James Cook University.

“Then, there is another side of the conservation community that says these places are protected already because they’re remote, and the money that we spend on them is a waste, and we should be conserving things where we’ll have a real impact.”



Australia's Great Barrier Reef in 2009. (LCDR Eric Johnson, NOAA Corps)

To help make sense of these questions, Cinner and his three dozen or so collaborators attempted to measure the conservation gains of marine reserves. They found that the level of activity outside of a coral reef protected area, measured by size and distance of the nearby human population and their access to the reef, had a strong influence over the effectiveness of protections.

While overall fish populations were higher in protected areas, they still tended to be much lower in reserves located near dense population centers than in those in remote, pristine areas.

On these remote reefs where there's already not much fishing, marine reserves seemed to make little difference to overall fish abundance – findings that corroborate the argument that remote regions do not need protection. On the other hand, reserves placed in areas of moderate to high impacts “can provide substantial conservation gains in fish biomass,” according to the paper.

Such gains, however, hardly amount to fully restored ecosystems. On average, a marine reserve in a high-pressure area boasted about five times the amount of fish compared to an unprotected, heavily fished reef, according to the study. “The depressing side to this is that the absolute amount of fish in these high-pressure marine reserves is still only a quarter what you find in these low-impact areas,” Cinner said. In other words, the scientists found that enforced marine reserves can help to boost fish numbers in fished regions but not nearly close to anything resembling historical or unfished levels.

Of concern was the fact that reserves placed in areas of high or moderate human impact seemed to have few, if any, benefits for top predators, especially sharks, groupers, snappers and jacks. The authors reported seeing top predators on only 28 percent of the 1,798 reef sites studied. As the level of human activities increases in surrounding waters, the probability of encountering a top predator on tropical coral reefs “dropped to almost zero, regardless of management.” The authors concluded that no-fishing reserves in remote areas are, in fact, critical for sustaining populations of top predators.

Cinner said the takeaway from his and his colleagues’ research should not be that most marine reserves don’t work. For fishers, marine reserves clearly can offer substantial benefits. But when it comes to restoring a fully functional ecosystem, marine reserves may fall short of expectations.

“Our paper makes it clear that there are pros and cons of placing reserves in different areas, and that to decide how successful a reserve is, you need to know

what your goal is,” he said.

The conclusions of Cinner’s work are consistent with other research showing that marine reserves may fail to produce anticipated benefits, especially when expectations are high. In a 2014 [paper](#) in the journal *Nature*, a research team, led by Graham Edgar of the University of Tasmania and also a coauthor on the new study, reported that 60 percent of 87 marine protected areas (MPAs) analyzed “were not ecologically distinguishable from fished sites.” The most effective reserves analyzed in that study were ones that were larger than 100 square km (39 square miles), older than 10 years, isolated by deep water or sand, and that had well-enforced no-take restrictions.

Another [paper](#) published in *Nature Communications* in 2016 found that even the distance from the nearest seafood market seemed to have more impact on the size and abundance of fish on coral reefs than its protected status.

However, Daniel Pauly, a professor of fisheries at the University of British Columbia, feels some conservationists set the bar too high for what they hope to gain from marine reserves. This can wind up skewing their own opinions of a marine reserve’s success, even when the reserve produces significant gains.

“The expectation we have of marine reserves is immense – that they can restore a fully functioning ecosystem, which they can’t,” he said. Returning to “what we had 200 years ago,” he said, is a “crazy expectation.” Rather, success should be gauged by “a more reasonable standard” that uses the ecological health of surrounding areas as a baseline.

“We should be asking if reserves have given us something better than what we’d have if we didn’t have a reserve at all,” he said. “By that measure most reserves can succeed.” Wide-ranging species such as tuna, as well as sea turtles, may experience virtually no benefits from marine reserves, however, he said.

A limitation of the study’s ability to draw broad conclusions is that it looked only at coral reefs. [Mark Carr](#), a marine biologist at the University of California, Santa Cruz, said it isn’t clear if the results would have been similar in temperate regions. Marine reserves in tropical nations may often be relatively ineffective because of how intensively the surrounding areas may be fished, he noted.



Regal angelfish in the Federated States of Micronesia. (Dr. Dwayne Meadows, NOAA/NMFS/OPR)

“They went to a lot of developing countries where they’re fishing the hell out of the place, and that can really diminish the performance of a marine reserve,” he said. He noted that in many developing nations “there is no fishing management at all, and that’s just unheard of now in most temperate countries.

“Also, the reserves in these tropical countries aren’t set up in any kind of network, which we’ve found is really important,” Carr added.

For instance, California created a system of reserves, which he called “the

posterchild for effectively designed marine protected areas.” The reserves were spaced strategically to create a network that now protects about 18 percent of coastal waters. That is on top of effective fisheries management. Populations of fish that were considered overfished 20 years ago – such as lingcod and many rockfish – are now recovered and abundant, thanks largely to temporary fishing closures and restrictions on harvest.

“You can’t just manage MPAs in a vacuum, and you can’t have fishery management in a vacuum,” Carr said.

MARINE CONSERVATION # MARINE PROTECTED AREAS # MPA

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