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Overfishing in West Africa: How EU companies are contributing to depleting vital fish stocks

BY: [Arin Owoturo](#)TOPICS: [ILLEGAL, UNREPORTED, AND UNREGULATED \(IUU\) FISHING](#), [INCREASING INTERNATIONAL FISHERIES TRANSPARENCY](#)

Overfishing small pelagic fish, like sardinella in West Africa, has devastating consequences for the region's coastal communities. These fish are often destined for fishmeal and fish oil production, which is heavily driven by European demand for farmed salmon, worth 8.4 billion euros in 2022.

Investigations, such as those led by Danwatch, reveal that companies like Denmark's FF Skagen, a leading fish oil producer, and fishmeal, benefit significantly from this exploitation. In countries like Senegal and Gambia, where 90% of the population relies on fishing for their livelihoods, the depletion of marine resources has created a dire situation for local fishers and their families. Moreover, European companies own fishmeal plants and vessels flagged to West African nations, further entrenching their role in the depletion of these vital fish stocks.

A CRISIS FOR COASTAL COMMUNITIES

The depletion of fish stocks has led to socioeconomic hardship for West African coastal communities. Local fishers often return from the sea empty-handed, with no fish to sell, no food for their families, and no means of sustaining their way of life. The situation is bleak in Yenne, where fish such as the bonga shad, a local staple food, have been severely overharvested.

This has resulted in widespread job loss and the collapse of livelihoods. According to Danwatch, many fishers, faced with dwindling opportunities, are forced to abandon their way of life and their homes, and embark on dangerous journeys using small boats to cross the Atlantic, in the hope of a better life in Europe. This migration is driven by environmental degradation and economic despair and has become increasingly common. Tragically, many of these journeys end in disaster, as the risks of crossing the open ocean in small boats are immense.

THE ROLE OF INDUSTRIAL FISHING AND FISHMEAL FACTORIES

The industrial fishing activities of Chinese, Russian and Turkish trawlers, as well as local trawlers owned by European companies are a major driver of this problem. These vessels, operating at unsustainable rates, often outcompete local fishers and deplete coastal waters. Compounding the problem is demand from fishmeal and fish oil factories, which plays a significant role in driving the overexploitation of fish stocks.

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Fishmeal production not only removes vital protein sources from local tables but also affects the quality of life for nearby communities. Residents near factories are forced to endure environmental degradation, as well as terrible odours.

THE GLOBAL CONSEQUENCES

The consequences of overfishing in West Africa perpetuate a system of inequality that threatens the livelihoods of small-scale fishers. Aquaculture has become part of the problem – specifically aquaculture that requires ‘feed’ such as fishmeal and fish oil, which are produced both from fisheries byproduct and from wild-caught fish. This dependence exacerbates the pressure on forage fish, undermining the ocean’s ecological balance. Additionally, the lack of transparency in the procurement of fishmeal and fish oil, from poor working conditions on industrial vessels to unlogged catch data, makes it difficult for consumers to make ethical choices about the seafood they eat.

CALL FOR ACTION

Oceana is calling for urgent measures to address transparency in the fish meal and fish oil industry. Vanya Vulperhorst, illegal fishing and transparency campaign director at Oceana in Europe, emphasises the need for increased transparency and improved traceability in fisheries. Under EU rules against illegal fishing, any wild-caught fish imported into the EU must have documents proving it was caught legally. However, current rules exclude fishmeal and fish oil, creating loopholes that enable overexploitation. The EU needs to stop ignoring this issue and ensure that European citizens and companies do not cause environmental or human harm or profit from illegal or unregulated fishing.

Governments, companies, and consumers must act to ensure sustainable fishing practices – in the waters of both the EU and the countries that export to it. This includes the need for regional cooperation and management of these resources, enforcing stricter regulations on industrial fishing and protecting the rights of local fishers. Without immediate action, the dark consequences of overfishing in West Africa will only deepen, driving more people into poverty and fuelling further dangerous migration.

That’s why Oceana has launched the [Follow the Fish campaign](#), which aims to improve consumer information about seafood in Europe by making it mandatory to label products with the fish species, origin, catch method, and the country that caught it. This will help EU consumers to avoid buying seafood linked to overfishing, illegal practices, environmental harm, or poor working conditions.

Addressing overfishing requires not only local solutions but also international cooperation. By holding EU companies accountable and prioritising the sustainability of shared resources, we can safeguard the future for all.

Sources:

[The Outlaw ocean project](#)

[Danwatch](#)

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