THE SMELL OF MONEY

In the small coastal country, an exploding industry has led to big economic promises, and a steep environmental price.

By Ian Urbina / March 1, 2021

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Fish Farming is Feeding the Globe, What's the Cost for Locals?

Gunjur, a town of some fifteen thousand people, sits on the Atlantic coastline of southern Gambia, the smallest country in mainland Africa. In the spring of 2017, the town's white-sand beaches were full of activity. Fishermen steered long, vibrantly painted wooden canoes, known as pirogues, toward the shore, where they transferred their still-fluttering catch to women waiting at the water's edge. The fish were hauled off to nearby open-air markets in rusty metal wheelbarrows or in baskets balanced on heads. Small boys played soccer as tourists watched from lounge chairs. At nightfall, the beach was dotted with bonfires. There were drumming and kora lessons; men with oiled chests grappled in traditional wrestling matches.

But just five minutes inland was a more tranquil setting—the wildlife reserve known as Bolong Fenyo. Established in 2008, the reserve was meant to protect seven hundred and ninety acres of beach, mangrove swamp, wetland, and savanna, as well as an oblong lagoon. A half mile long and a few hundred yards wide, the lagoon had been a lush habitat for a remarkable variety of migratory birds, as well as humpback dolphins, epauletted fruit bats, Nile crocodiles, and callithrix monkeys. A marvel of biodiversity, the reserve was integral to the region's ecological health—and, with hundreds of birders and other tourists visiting each year, to its economic health, too.

But on the morning of May 22nd the Gunjur community woke to discover that the Bolong Fenyo lagoon had turned a cloudy crimson overnight. Dead fish floated on the surface. "Everything is red," one local reporter wrote, "and every living thing is dead." Some residents wondered if the apocalyptic scene was an omen delivered in blood. More likely, water fleas in the lagoon had turned red in response to sudden changes in pH or oxygen levels. Soon, there were reports that many of the area's birds were no longer nesting near the lagoon.

A few residents filled bottles with the tainted water and brought them to the one person in town they thought might be able to help—Ahmed Manjang. Born and raised in Gunjur, Manjang was living in Saudi Arabia, where he worked as a microbiologist. He happened to be home visiting his extended family, and he collected his own samples from the lagoon, sending them to two laboratories in Germany for analysis. The results were alarming. The water contained double the amount of arsenic and forty times the amount of phosphates and nitrates deemed safe. Pollution at these levels, Manjang concluded, could have only one source: illegally dumped waste from a Chinese fish-processing plant called Golden Lead, which operates on the edge of the reserve. That summer,

Gambian environmental authorities filed a lawsuit against the plant, and reportedly reached a settlement for twenty-five thousand dollars, an amount that Manjang described as "paltry and offensive." The plant's license was briefly revoked, but operations soon started back up. When I reached him last month, Manjang had relocated to Gunjur to take a teaching job at the local university. By then, it wasn't just the lagoon that had been transformed; the coastal waters had also turned a reddish brown.

Golden Lead (pronounced "leed") is one outpost of an ambitious Chinese economic and geopolitical agenda known as the Belt and Road Initiative, which the Chinese government has said is meant to build good will abroad, boost economic coöperation, and provide otherwise inaccessible development opportunities to poorer nations. As part of the initiative, China has become the largest foreign financier of infrastructure development in Africa, cornering the market on most of the continent's road, pipeline, power-plant, and port projects. In 2017, China cancelled fourteen million dollars in Gambian debt and invested thirty-three million to develop agriculture and fisheries, including Golden Lead and two other fish-processing plants along the fifty-mile Gambian coast. The residents of Gunjur were told that Golden Lead would bring jobs, a fish market, and a newly paved three-mile road through the heart of town.

Golden Lead and the other factories were rapidly built to meet exploding global demand for fish meal—a lucrative dark-yellow powder made by cooking and pulverizing fish. Exported to the United States, Europe, and Asia, fish meal is used as a protein-rich supplement in the booming industry of fish farming, or aquaculture. West Africa is among the world's fastest-growing producers of it: more than fifty processing plants operate along the shores of Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, and Gambia. And the volume of fish they consume is enormous. One Gambian plant alone takes in more than seven thousand five hundred tons of fish a year, mostly of a local type of shad known as bonga—a silvery fish about ten inches long.

For the area's fishermen, most of whom toss their nets by hand from pirogues powered by small outboard motors, the rise of aquaculture transformed their working conditions. Hundreds of legal and illegal foreign fishing boats, including industrial trawlers and purse seiners, began crisscrossing the waters off the Gambian coast, decimating the region's fish stocks and jeopardizing local livelihoods. Abdul Sisai, a fisherman who sold his catch at the Tanji market, north of Gunjur, said that two decades ago bonga were so plentiful that they were sometimes given away for free. But the price of the fish has soared in recent years, and for many Gambians, half of whom live in poverty, bonga is now more expensive than they can afford. (Fish accounts for fifty per cent of the country's animal-protein intake.) Sisai began supplementing his income from the fish market by selling trinkets near the tourist resorts in the evenings. "*Sibijan deben*," he said in Mandinka, one of the region's major languages. The phrase refers to the shade cast by a palm tree and is used to describe the effects of extractive export industries: the profits are enjoyed by people far from the source.

Nearly a year after the lagoon turned red, a new controversy erupted over a long wastewater pipe running under a public beach, dumping the plant's waste directly into the sea. Swimmers were complaining of rashes, the ocean had grown thick with seaweed, and thousands of dead fish had washed ashore, along with eels, rays, turtles, dolphins, and even whales. Residents burned scented candles and incense to combat the rancid odor coming from the fish-meal plants, and tourists wore white masks. The stench of rotten fish clung to clothes and was virtually impossible to remove.

In March of 2018, about a hundred and fifty residents gathered on the beach wielding shovels and pickaxes to dig up the pipe and destroy it. Two months later, with the government's approval, workers from Golden Lead installed a new pipe, this time planting a Chinese flag alongside it. The gesture carried colonialist overtones. One local called it "the new imperialism."

Jojo Huang, the director of the plant, has publicly denied polluting nearby waters, and said that the facility follows all regulations for waste disposal. The plant has benefitted the town, Golden Lead told Reuters, by investing in local education and making Ramadan donations to the community. (The company did not respond to multiple requests for comment.)

Manjang, the microbiologist, was outraged by the plant's apparent impunity. "It makes no sense!" he told me, when I visited him in Gunjur at his family compound, an enclosed three-acre plot with several simple brick houses and a garden of cassava, orange, and avocado trees. Behind Manjang's thick-rimmed glasses, his gaze was gentle and direct, even as he spoke urgently about the perils facing Gambia's environment. "The Chinese are exporting our bonga fish to feed it to their tilapia fish, which they're shipping back here to Gambia to sell to us, more expensively—but only after it's been pumped full of hormones and antibiotics," he said. Adding to the absurdity, he noted, tilapia are herbivores that normally eat algae and other sea plants.

After the wastewater pipe was reinstalled, Manjang contacted environmentalists and journalists, along with Gambian lawmakers, calling the pollution "an absolute disaster." But he was warned by the Gambian trade minister that pushing the issue would only jeopardize foreign investment. Dr. Bamba Banja, the head of the Ministry of Fisheries and Water Resources, was dismissive, telling a reporter that the awful stench outside the plants was just "the smell of money."

Global demand for seafood has doubled since the nineteen-sixties. Our appetite for fish has outpaced what we can sustainably catch: more than eighty per cent of the world's wild fish stocks have collapsed or are unable to withstand more fishing. Aquaculture has emerged as an alternative—a shift, as the industry likes to say, from capture to culture.

The fastest-growing segment of global food production, the aquaculture industry is worth a hundred and sixty billion dollars and accounts for roughly half of the world's fish consumption. And even as retail seafood sales at restaurants and hotels have plummeted during the pandemic, the dip has been offset in many places by the increase in people cooking fish at home. The United States imports eighty per cent of its seafood, much of which is farmed. Often, it comes from China, by far the world's largest producer, where fish are grown in sprawling landlocked pools or in offshore pens spanning several square miles.

Aquaculture has existed in rudimentary forms for centuries, and it does have some clear benefits over catching fish in the wild. It reduces the problem of bycatch—the thousands of tons of unwanted fish that are swept up each year by the gaping nets of industrial fishing boats, only to suffocate and be tossed back into the sea. And farming bivalves (oysters, clams, and mussels) promises a cheaper form of protein than traditional fishing for wild-caught species. In India and other parts of Asia, these farms have become a crucial source of jobs, especially for women. Aquaculture makes it easier for wholesalers to insure that their supply chains are not indirectly supporting illegal fishing, environmental crimes, or forced labor. There's potential for environmental benefits, too: with the right protocols, aquaculture uses less freshwater and arable land than most animal agriculture. The carbon emissions produced per pound of fish are a quarter of those produced per pound of beef, and two-thirds of those produced per pound of pork.

Still, there are also hidden costs. When millions of fish are crowded together, they generate a lot of waste. If they're penned in shallow coastal pools, the solid waste turns into a thick slime on the seafloor, smothering plants and animals. Nitrogen and phosphorus levels spike in surrounding waters, causing algal blooms, killing wild fish, and driving away tourists. Bred to grow faster and bigger, the farmed fish sometimes escape their enclosures and threaten indigenous species.

Drawbacks aside, leading environmental groups have embraced the idea that industrial aquaculture could help feed the planet's growing population—and the growing demand for animal protein. In a 2019 report, the Nature Conservancy argued that by 2050 sustainable fish farms should become our primary source of seafood. Many conservationists advocate stronger oversight, better composting, and new technologies for recirculating the water in on-land pools. Some have also pushed for aquaculture farms to be located in deeper waters with faster and more diluting currents.

The biggest challenge to farming fish is feeding them. Food constitutes roughly seventy per cent of the industry's overhead, and so far the only commercially viable form is fish meal. About a quarter of all fish caught globally at sea end up as fish meal, produced by factories like those on the Gambian coast. Perversely, the aquaculture farms that yield some of the most popular seafood, such as carp, salmon, or European sea bass, actually consume more fish than they ship to supermarkets and restaurants. Before it gets to market, a "ranched" tuna can eat more than fifteen times its weight in free-roaming fish that has been converted to fish meal. Researchers have identified various potential alternative food sources—including seaweed, cassava waste, soldier-fly larvae, single-cell proteins produced by fungi and bacteria, and even human sewage—but none are being produced affordably at scale. So, for now, fish meal it is.

The result is a troubling paradox: the seafood industry is ostensibly trying to slow the rate of ocean depletion, but, by farming the fish we eat most, it's draining the stock of many others—the ones that never make it to the aisles of Western supermarkets. Gambia exports much of its fish meal to China and Norway, where it fuels an abundant and inexpensive supply of farmed salmon for European and American consumption. Meanwhile, the fish that Gambians themselves rely on are rapidly disappearing.

In September of 2019, at a meeting in the Gambian National Assembly House, a white ultra-modern building that emerges out of the ground like a wave, James Gomez, a government minister, assured lawmakers that the country's fisheries were thriving. Industrial fishing boats and plants represented the largest employer of Gambians in the country, including hundreds of deckhands, factory workers, truck drivers, and industry regulators. When a lawmaker asked him about controversies at the fish-meal plants, including their voracious consumption of bonga, Gomez refused to engage, insisting that Gambian waters even had enough fish to sustain two more plants.

Estimating the health of a nation's fish stock is a murky science. Marine researchers like to say that counting fish is like counting trees, except they're mostly invisible—below the surface—and constantly moving. Ad Corten, a Dutch fisheries biologist, told me that the task is even tougher in West Africa, where many countries lack the funding to properly analyze their stocks. The only reliable assessments in the area have focussed on Mauritania, Corten said, and they show a sharp decline driven by the fish-meal industry. "Gambia is the worst of them all," he said, noting that the fisheries ministry barely tracks how many fish are caught by licensed ships, much less by the unlicensed ones.

As global fish stocks have been depleted, many wealthier nations have increased their marine policing, often by stepping up port inspections, imposing steep fines for violations, and using satellites to spot illicit activity at sea. They have also required industrial boats to carry mandatory observers and to install monitoring devices onboard. But Gambia has historically lacked the political will, technical skill, and financial capacity to exert its authority offshore. Still, though it has no maritime police of its own, the country is trying to better protect its waters. A month before the Assembly meeting, I joined a secret patrol that the fisheries ministry was conducting with the help of the international ocean-conservation group Sea Shepherd, which had brought to the area—as surreptitiously as it could—a hundred-and-eighty-four-foot ship, the Sam Simon, equipped with extra fuel capacity and a doubly reinforced steel hull.

In Gambia, the nine miles of water closest to the shore have been reserved for local fishermen, but on the days leading up to the patrol dozens of foreign trawlers were visible from the beach. Sea Shepherd's mission was to find and board trespassers or other vessels engaged in prohibited behaviors, such as shark finning and the netting of juvenile fish. In the past few years, the group has also worked with governments in Gabon, Liberia, Tanzania, Benin, and Namibia. Some fisheries experts have criticized these collaborations as publicity stunts, but the patrols have led to the arrest of more than sixty illegal fishing ships.

Barely a dozen local government officials had been informed of the Sea Shepherd mission. To avoid being spotted by fishermen, the group used several small speedboats to spirit a dozen heavily armed Gambian Navy and fisheries officers out to the Sam Simon after dark. We were joined by two gruff private-security contractors from Israel, who were training the Gambian officers in military procedures for boarding ships. While we waited on the moonlit deck, one of the Gambian guards, dressed in a crisp blue-

and-white camouflage uniform, showed me a music video on his phone by one of Gambia's best-known rappers, ST Brikama Boyo. He translated the lyrics of a song, called "Fuwareyaa," which means "poverty": "People like us don't have meat, and the Chinese have taken our sea from us in Gunjur, and now we don't have fish."

Three hours after we embarked, the foreign ships had all but vanished. Sensing that word about the operation had got out, the captain changed plans. Instead of focussing on the smaller unlicensed ships close to land that were mostly from neighboring African countries, he would conduct surprise at-sea inspections of fifty-five industrial ships that *were* licensed to be in Gambian waters. It was a bold move: officers would be boarding larger, well-financed ships, many of them with political connections in China and Gambia.

Less than an hour later, we pulled alongside the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010, a hundred-and-thirty-four-foot electric-blue trawler streaked with rust, operated by Qingdao Tangfeng Ocean Fishery, a Chinese company that supplies Gambia's fish-meal plants. A team of eight Gambians from the Sam Simon boarded the ship, AK-47s slung over their shoulders. One nervous officer forgot the bullhorn he was assigned to carry. Another officer's sunglasses fell into the sea as he leaped onto the deck.

Onboard the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 were seven Chinese officers and a crew of four Gambians and thirty-five Senegalese. The Gambian team soon began grilling the ship's captain, a short man named Qiu Shenzhong, who wore a shirt smeared with fish guts. Belowdecks, ten African crew members in yellow gloves and stained smocks stood shoulder to shoulder on either side of a conveyor belt, sorting bonga, mackerel, and whitefish into pans. Nearby, floor-to-ceiling rows of freezers were barely cold. Roaches scurried up the walls and across the floor, where some fish had been stepped on and squashed.

I spoke to one of the workers, who told me that his name was Lamin Jarju. Though no one could hear us above the deafening *ca-thunk*, *ca-thunk* of the machinery, he stepped away from the line and lowered his voice. The ship, he told me, had been fishing within the nine-mile zone until the Captain received a radioed warning from nearby ships that a policing effort was under way. When I asked Jarju why he was willing to reveal the ship's violation, he said, "Follow me," and led me up two levels to the roof of the wheel room, the Captain's office. He showed me a large nest of crumpled newspapers, clothing, and blankets, where he said several crew members had been sleeping for the past several weeks, ever since the Captain hired more workers than the ship could accommodate. "They treat us like dogs," Jarju said.

When I returned to the deck, an argument was escalating. A Gambian Navy lieutenant named Modou Jallow had discovered that the ship's fishing logbook was blank. All captains are required to keep detailed accounts of where they go, how long they work, what gear they use, and what they catch. Jallow had issued an arrest order for the infraction and was yelling in Chinese. Captain Qiu was incandescent with rage. "No one keeps that!" he shouted back.

He was not wrong. Paperwork violations are common, especially on fishing boats along the coast of West Africa, where countries don't always provide clear guidance about their rules. Captains tend to view logbooks as weapons of bribe-seeking bureaucrats or as tools of conservationists bent on closing fishing grounds. But scientists rely on proper records to determine fishing locations, depths, dates, gear descriptions, and "effort"—how long nets or lines are in the water relative to the quantity of fish they ensnare. Without such logs, it's almost impossible to determine how quickly Gambia's waters are being depleted.

Jallow ordered the ship back to port, and the argument moved from the upper deck down to the engine room, where Qiu claimed that he needed a few hours to fix a pipe—enough time, the Sam Simon crew suspected, for him to contact his bosses in China and ask them to call in a favor with high-level Gambian officials. Jallow, sensing a stalling tactic, smacked Qiu in the face. "You will make the fix in an hour!" Jallow shouted, grabbing the Captain by the throat. "And I will watch you do it." Twenty minutes later, the Lu Lao Yuan Yu 010 was en route to shore.

Over the next several weeks, the Sam Simon inspected fourteen foreign ships—most of them Chinese and licensed to fish in Gambian waters—and arrested thirteen of them: all but one vessel was charged with lacking a proper logbook, and many were also fined for improper living conditions and for violating a law that Gambians must compose twenty per cent of certain shipping crews. On one Chinese-owned vessel, there weren't enough boots for the deckhands, and a Senegalese worker had been pricked by a catfish whisker while wearing flip-flops. His swollen foot, oozing from the puncture wound, looked like a rotting eggplant. On another ship, eight workers slept in a space meant for two—a four-foot-tall steel-sided compartment directly above the engine room—which was dangerously hot. When high waves crashed on board, water flooded the makeshift cabin, where, the workers said, an electrical power strip had twice almost electrocuted them.

One rainy afternoon in Gambia's capital city, Banjul, on the coast just north of Gunjur, I sought out Mustapha Manneh, a journalist and an environmental advocate. We met in the white tiled lobby of the Laico Atlantic hotel, decorated with fake potted plants and thick yellow drapes. Pachelbel's Canon played in an endless loop in the background, accompanied by the plinking of water dripping from the ceiling into half a dozen buckets. Manneh had recently returned to Gambia after a year in Cyprus, where he had fled following the arrest of his father and brother for political activism against Yahya Jammeh, a brutal autocrat who was forced from power in 2017. Manneh, who told me that he hoped to become President one day, offered to take me to the Golden Lead factory.

The next morning, Manneh picked me up in a Toyota Corolla that he had rented for the difficult drive. Most of the road from the hotel to Golden Lead was dirt, which recent rain had turned into a treacherous slalom course of deep and almost impassable craters. The trip was about thirty miles, and took nearly two hours. Over the din of a missing muffler, he prepared me for the visit. "Cameras away," he cautioned. "No saying anything critical about fish meal." Just a week before my arrival, some of the same fishermen who had pulled up the plant's wastewater pipe had apparently switched sides, attacking a team of European researchers who had tried to photograph the facility, pelting them with rocks and rotten fish. Some locals, though they opposed the dumping and resented the export of their fish, did not want foreign media publicizing Gambia's problems.

We finally pulled up at the entrance of the plant, five hundred yards from the beach, behind a ten-foot wall of white corrugated metal. An acrid stench, like burning orange peels and rotting meat, assaulted us as soon as we got out of the car. Between the factory and the beach was a muddy patch of land, studded with palm trees and strewn with litter, where fishermen were repairing their boats in thatched-roof huts. The day's catch lay on a set of folding tables, and women were cleaning the fish, smoking it, and drying it for sale. One of the women wore a hijab dripping wet from the surf. When I asked her about the catch, she gave me a dour look and tipped her basket toward me. It was barely half full. "We can't compete," she said. Pointing at the factory, she added, "It all goes there."

The Golden Lead plant consists of several football-field-size concrete buildings, and sixteen silos where dried fish meal and chemicals are stored. Fish meal is relatively simple to make, and the process is highly mechanized. Video footage clandestinely taken by a worker inside Golden Lead reveals a cavernous space—dusty, hot, and dark. At a plant of its size, there are about a dozen men on the floor at any given time. Sweating profusely, several shovel shiny heaps of bonga into a steel funnel. A conveyor belt carries the fish into a vat, where a giant churning screw grinds it into a gooey paste before it enters a long cylindrical oven. Oil is extracted from the goo, and the remaining substance is pulverized into a fine powder and dumped onto the floor in the middle of the warehouse, accumulating into a huge golden mound. After the powder cools, workers shovel it into fifty-kilogram plastic sacks that are stacked from floor to ceiling. A shipping container holds four hundred sacks, and the men fill roughly twenty to forty containers a day.

Near the entrance of Golden Lead, a dozen or so young men hustled from shore to plant with baskets on their heads, brimming with bonga. Standing under several gangly palm trees, a forty-two-year-old fisherman named Ebrima Jallow explained that, although the local women pay more for a single basket than Golden Lead does, the plant buys in bulk and often pays for twenty baskets in advance—in cash. “The women can’t do that,” he said.

A few hundred yards away, Dawda Jack Jabang, the fifty-seven-year-old owner of the Treehouse Lodge, a deserted beachfront hotel and restaurant, stood in a side courtyard staring at the breaking waves. “I spent two good years working on this place,” he told me. “And overnight Golden Lead destroyed my life.” Hotel bookings had plummeted, and the plant’s odor at times was so noxious that patrons left his restaurant before finishing their meal.

Golden Lead has hurt more than helped the local economy, Jabang said. But what about all those young men hauling their baskets of fish to the factory? He waved the question away dismissively: “This is not the employment we want. They’re turning us into donkeys and monkeys.”

The *covid*-19 pandemic has highlighted the tenuousness of this economic landscape, as well as its corruption. Last May, many of the migrant workers on fishing crews returned home to celebrate Eid al-Fitr just as borders were closing down. With workers unable to return to Gambia, and with lockdown measures in place, Golden Lead and other plants temporarily suspended operation.

At least, they were supposed to. Manneh obtained secret recordings in which Bamba Banja, of the Ministry of Fisheries, discussed taking bribes in exchange for allowing factories to operate during the lockdown. In October, Banja took a leave of absence after an investigation found that, between 2018 and 2020, he had accepted ten thousand dollars from Chinese fishermen and companies, including Golden Lead. He declined to comment for this article. The plants are now legally operating again, but, with the price of gas rising, fishermen are spending less and less time on the water. They continue to take cash advances from the fish-meal plants, and the fewer fish they bring in, the more mired in debt they become.

On the day that I visited Golden Lead, when the pandemic was still an unknown threat on the horizon, I made my way down to the beach. The pirogues bobbed close to shore and fishermen waded knee-deep in the water. The surf was gentle, with hardly a wave in sight. I found Golden Lead's new wastewater pipe easily. It was about a foot in diameter and already rusted, rising above the sand. The Chinese flag was gone. Kneeling down, I felt liquid flowing through it. Within minutes, a Gambian guard appeared and ordered me to leave the area.

The next day, I took a taxi to the country's international airport, located an hour from Banjul, to catch my flight home. My luggage was light now that I'd thrown away the putrid-smelling clothes from my trip to the plant. At one point, as the driver negotiated pothole after pothole, he vented his frustration. "This," he said, gesturing ahead of us, "is the road the fish-meal plant promised to pave."

At the airport, I discovered that my flight had been delayed by a flock of buzzards and gulls blocking the only runway. Several years earlier, the Gambian government had built a landfill close by, and scavenger birds descended in droves. While I waited among a dozen German and Australian tourists, I called Manneh. I reached him at home, in the town of Kartong, seven miles from Gunjur.

Manneh told me that he was standing in his front yard, looking out on a litter-strewn highway that connects the JXYG factory, a Chinese fish-meal plant, to Gambia's largest port, in Banjul. In the few minutes we had been talking, he said, he had watched ten tractor-trailer trucks rattle by, kicking up thick clouds of dust as they went, each hauling a forty-foot-long shipping container full of fish meal. From Banjul, those containers would depart for Asia, Europe, and the United States.

"Every day," Manneh said, "it's more."

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