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Mauritania faces the plundering of its waters

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REPORT | : In Nouadhibou, "the extreme concentration of foreign vessels" is fueling an industry disrupted by fishmeal and fish oil exports. The effects on fisheries resources are devastating.

Night has just fallen on the port of Nouadhibou, in northwest Mauritania, and the *Wafa 5* doesn't have a minute to lose at the dock. This mid-June evening, "150 tons of aurita sardinella are being unloaded" from the trawler, according to its Mauritanian owner, Aziz Boughourbal, so that this small fish, highly prized in West Africa, can be processed as quickly as possible in his freezing plant.

Gloved and veiled, hundreds of women sort the catch, seemingly oblivious to the noise of pallet trucks. Iced in white containers, the fish will leave at dawn for "Conakry, Abidjan, or Nouakchott."

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L'opération qui pourrait être banale dans l'une des places fortes de la pêche mondiale – le port de Nouadhibou abrite 6 000 à 7 000 pirogues et 400 navires venus du monde entier – est en réalité loin d'être anodine. Avant la construction d'usines de congélation, accélérée par l'instauration en 2021, d'un quota officiel de 20 % de poissons pêchés à destination des réserves à la consommation humaine les *congras, oil, meal and oil* [FHP] ,” recalls Cheikh Baye Braham, a researcher at the Mauritanian Institute for Oceanographic and Fisheries Research (Imrop) in Nouadhibou. In 2024, FHP still represented more than 50% of exported fish products.

Rivalry between major maritime powers

Providing 300,000 jobs in the country, the fishing sector is still struggling to make the transition from "Moka", the nickname for fish meal and oil in Mauritania, to freezing. *"The limited processing infrastructure (...) has encouraged the proliferation of the fish meal and oil industry in West Africa"*, laments the aforementioned scientist. Confined to a thin strip of land, the coastal city of Nouadhibou has 29 of the 46 units in the country intended to grind sardines, sardinella, horse mackerel and mackerel to make cattle feed and feed intensive fish, pig and poultry farms across the planet.



A street in the industrial district of Nouadhibou, where the majority of fishmeal factories have closed. The sector is facing government restrictions since 2021 and dwindling pelagic fish stocks, in Nouadhibou (Mauritania), June 16, 2025. SYLVAIN CHERKAOUJ FOR "LE MONDE"





A porter carries a crate of fish during unloading upon arrival of the canoes in Nouadhibou (Mauritania), June 16, 2025. SYLVAIN CHERKAOUI FOR "LE MONDE"

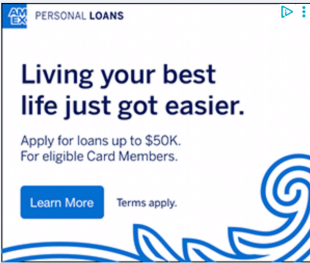
"The number of factories has exploded," says Mansour Boidaha, president of the only local environmental NGO, "due as much to the boom in the global animal protein revolution as to the specific characteristics of the area." The exceptional topography linked to the Banc d'Arguin marine protected area located near Nouadhibou, combined with the oceanographic phenomenon of *upwelling*, where cold, deep waters full of nutrients rise to the surface, has made the region a popular fishing area and a vulnerable target.

Read the report |  ["Dizzying" police operations: Mauritania toughens its migration policy under pressure from Europe](#)



« La concentration extrême des navires étrangers sur cette zone minuscule extermine le poisson, prévient M. Boughourbal. « Quand vous pêchez ici juste ici; vous êtes en train de détruire les sites de frêtilage ground," continues Mr. Braham, the scientist who has been warning for years about overfishing and the "plundering of Mauritanian waters."

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The great diversity of fish stocks and the annual fishing potential, estimated at 1.8 million tonnes of fish, have made Nouadhibou a theatre of rivalry between major maritime powers: China, Russia, the European Union, and Turkey are competing to the tune of millions of euros for privileged fishing agreements to supply an industry disrupted by the explosion of fishmeal and fish oil. The effects are devastating.

“Economic and ecological catastrophe”

"For one ton of flour, you need an average of 4.5 tons of fish," Mr. Boughourbal emphasizes. "What in principle was only supposed to be a secondary activity of recycling waste and fish scraps has become a main activity." Despite the bans and quotas put in place in 2021 by Mauritania in an attempt to combat the "overexploitation" of fish resources, denounced on numerous occasions by the FAO, the UN food agency, Mauritania is struggling to reverse the trend. Officially, nearly 65,000 tons of flour and oils were exported mainly to Europe in 2024, or 292,500 tons of fish.



Aziz Boughourbal, manager of the company Omaurci SA, poses in front of "big bags" of fishmeal, in Nouadhibou (Mauritania), June 16, 2025. SYLVAIN CHERKAoui FOR "LE MONDE"

At the artisanal port of Nouadhibou (Mauritania), on June 16, 2025, worn pickup trucks wait to be loaded with fish. These vehicles, serving as a unit of measurement and capable of carrying up to 1.2 tons, are at the heart of the port's commercial activity. SYLVAIN CHERKAoui FOR "LE MONDE"

"It will take us years to remedy this dual economic and ecological catastrophe," summarizes Mr. Boughourbal. Heir to a family fishing group, Seph SA, the entrepreneur is still a player in this Moka industry, which poses "major risks to the food security" of Mauritania's neighbors, as reported by the FAO and NGOs like Greenpeace.

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« L'histoire nous a donné raison de développer tardivement une filière de FHP, même si économiquement ce fut une erreur stratégique », décrypte M. Boughourbal. Après avoir entamé, dès 2001, une production pour les conserveries d'Europe de l'Est, il dit avoir attendu « 2010 pour la farine ».

« Nous étions approvisionnés par des pirogues artisanales dont les pêches impropres à la consommation humaine » et les déchets pouvaient représenter « 20 à 50 % de leurs captures », explique-t-il, au milieu de son

nangar reserve aux « *big bag* », ces sacs d'une tonne de farine. La veille, drastic drop. Between 2020 and 2024, his company's FHP exports fell from 12,979 tons to 5,543 tons.

"There are simply no more fish."

Despite the prevailing gloom, Mr. Boughourbal has chosen to stay, unlike his rivals, who left as soon as official quotas were put in place in 2021. Of the 29 factories, barely ten are, according to industry professionals, still operating in the Bountiya industrial zone. The chimneys, whose black plumes polluted the town and poisoned its residents to the point of provoking protests, are now shut down. Four years ago, *"mountains of fish were rotting in the open air,"* says Mr. Boughourbal.



Sardinella aurita are dumped by a forklift into a receiving silo at the Omaurci SA factory in Nouadhibou (Mauritania), on June 16, 2025. These fish will then be sorted and prepared for freezing, the rest will be transformed into meal. SYLVAIN CHERKAoui FOR "LE MONDE"

Is stricter regulations from the Mauritanian authorities to blame? *"There are simply no more fish,"* says Béatrice Gorez of the Coalition for Fair Fisheries Agreements (CAPE). The platform of European and African artisanal fishing organizations and the Mauritanian entrepreneur jointly warn that there will soon be no more small pelagic resources to save in West Africa.



"This is why we need regional and concerted management so that the mistakes made in Mauritania are not repeated in Gambia and Guinea Bissau," argues Mr. Boughourbal. Turkish purse seiners and Chinese flour trawlers, former regulars in the Nouadhibou harbor, have already been

seen off the coasts of these two countries.

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