

Policy brief

Experimental fishing or experimental pillaging in Liberia?

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After the recent derogation for a Turkish purse seiner in Mauritania to fish in a zone reserved for artisanal fisheries, ‘Senegalized’ trawlers of Spanish origin are fishing for deep water shrimps in Liberia through the Senegal-Liberia agreement, supposedly for experimental purposes. This article examines what experimental fishing is according to Liberian law and questions the scientific value and economic benefits of such an experimental fishery.

1. Overview

In Mauritania, recently, a 40-metre purse seiner of Turkish origin¹ obtained a derogation to fish for small pelagics in a zone reserved for artisanal fishing, again under the guise of experimental fishing.

In the last months, trawlers of Spanish origin, registered in Senegal, have received an experimental fishing temporary authorisation to fish Liberian deep-water shrimp, through the Senegal-Liberia bilateral agreement. In both cases, the vessels are fishing intensively in specific locations, causing concern about the impact of this fishing on fragile resources.

¹ GOREZ, Béatrice, “Mauritania: A 40-metre seiner authorised to fish on the borders of the Banc d’Arguin”, CFFA-CAPE website, 13 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.cffacape.org/publications-blog/mauritania-a-40-metre-seiner-authorised-to-fish-at-the-gates-of-the-banc-darguin>

Experimental fishing or pillaging in Liberia?

Policy Brief – 26 October 2021

“Everyone understands what is meant by experimental fishing,” explains the scientist Ad Corten, expert on small pelagics fisheries, *“it is the use of commercial fishing vessels to explore the possibilities of a new fishery; that is, a fishery for a known species in a new area, or a fishery for a new species in a known area. Such an experiment should be small-scale and of limited duration to avoid negative effects on other species, or on the stock of the species under study. The experiment must be planned and closely controlled by scientists.”* (Ed. Informal exchange, quoted with permission).

While there is no clear definition at the FAO level for this type of fishery, some regional fisheries organisations, such as the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR),² specify that experimental fisheries are fisheries for which it is necessary to collect sufficient information to assess the distribution, abundance and demography of the target species, thereby enabling the potential yield of the fishery to be estimated; to examine the potential impacts of the fishery on dependent and related species and to enable the Scientific Committee to formulate and provide advice on appropriate catch and effort levels and fishing gear.

Clearly, the aim of experimental fishing is scientific. But is it always so, like in the case of the Senegalese boats in Liberia?

2. The Senegal-Liberia Fishing Agreement

A fishing agreement³ was signed between Senegal and Liberia in 2019, allowing access of Senegalese artisanal, semi-industrial and industrial vessels to Liberian waters. For industrial fishing, the agreement includes access for 2,000 GRT (up to 5 trawlers of 250 GRT each).

The Liberia Fisheries Law of 2019⁴ does not provide for experimental fishing, but only for research fishing for scientific purposes (Part 3 - section 10.24 Conditions for research fishing). This research fishing is subject to a series of conditions. Thus, any person requesting authorization to undertake this type of fishing must submit a detailed research plan for the duration of the fishing operation or related activities: *“No research fishing authorization shall be issued without such a plan having been submitted to and approved by the Director General.”* In addition, *“each research fishing authorization shall be subject to the embarking of at least two Liberian scientists or observers for the duration of the research at the expense of the person to whom the authorization is granted.”*

The results of the research and the raw data must be provided to the Director General within a specified time period in consultation with the researchers. The authorization must be consistent with any relevant fisheries management plan and the law also

² See the full definition in the official CCAMLR website. Available at: <https://www.ccamlr.org/en/compliance/fishery-notifications>

³ The full text of the agreement is available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d402069d36563000151fa5b/t/6177c0068a783861e199b814/1635237897930/_Accord+de+pe%CC%82che+entre+le+SN+et+le+Libe%CC%81ria+Signe%CC%81%2C+le+22+Janvier+2019+version+Englaise.pdf

⁴ The full text of the act amending the national fisheries and aquaculture authority law approved on November 26, 2019 is available at: <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/lbr192628.pdf>

Experimental fishing or pillaging in Liberia?

Policy Brief – 26 October 2021

suggests that the authorization should be subject to “*a requirement for the holder to undertake an environmental impact assessment of the research.*”

Experimental fishing is however mentioned in the protocol⁵ of the 2019 Senegal-Liberia bilateral agreement. Article 3.7 states that these fishing opportunities “*shall be considered as experimental fishing until such time as the stock assessment makes it possible to know the potential. Observer coverage must be 100% for trawlers.*”

In terms of fishing zone, the Liberian Fisheries and Aquaculture law clearly states the limit of the coastal exclusion zone, reserved for artisanal fishing, which is “*up to a distance of 6 nautical miles from the baselines used to delimit the territorial sea.*” However, the same text allows, in section 4.3 on the inshore exclusion zone, “*industrial shrimp, cephalopod and other vessels fishing for inshore species to trawl beyond 4 nautical miles.*”

3. Senegalese trawlers in Liberia: Intensive fishing...

Under the Senegal-Liberia Agreement, two Senegalese flagged trawlers, the SOKONE⁶ and the KANBAL III,⁷ belonging to the Senegalese company SOPERKA, which is part of the Grupo Pereira from Vigo (Spain), have received temporary authorization for experimental fishing in Liberian waters.

These trawlers are bottom trawlers, each almost 40 metres long. Data collected on Global Fishing Watch show that they trawled extensively, on deep water reefs, in July and August 2021.

On 11 September 2021, a third vessel, EL AMINE, also part of the SOPERKA fleet, arrived from Dakar and began trawling on the same reef as KANBAL III.

4. ...to be closely monitored, despite the lack of means

One would expect that vessels engaged in experimental fishing designed to gather information on the sustainability of the operation would themselves be committed to sustainability. One might wonder about the KANBAL III, which was singled out in 2017 because there were indications that the vessel had used a technique to reduce

⁵ Protocol on the implementation of the agreement on fisheries and aquaculture cooperation between the government of the Republic of Senegal and the government of the Republic of Liberia. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d402069d36563000151fa5b/t/6177c030aa7dbc4bc55e3750/1635237942388/_Protocol+entre+le+SN+et+le+Libe%CC%81ria+Signe%CC%81%2C+le+22+Janvier+2019+version+Englaise.pdf

⁶ You can follow this trawler on the Marine traffic website at:

<https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:763427/mmsi:663092000/imo:0/vessel:SOKONE>

⁷ More information on this trawler is available at: https://www.fleetmon.com/vessels/kanbal-iii_7618856_2017846/?language=fr

Experimental fishing or pillaging in Liberia?

Policy Brief – 26 October 2021

the opening of the meshes in the net,⁸ making its trawling even less selective. At the time, Senegalese authorities did not see fit to arrest the vessel, promising further investigations.

Another reason for concern is that, so far, neither the KANBAL III, the EL AMINE or the SOKONE have entered the port of Monrovia. Indeed, a good way for a country to control the catches made in its waters is to inspect the vessel upon its arrival in port. The conditions of the experimental fishing authorisation provide for this to be the case, unless the port in Liberia is not operational to receive the landing of catches taken by industrial fishing vessels. In that case, the license expressly states that the landing shall be made in Senegal.

But, on 27 September, the KANBAL III was landing in the port of ... Abidjan. In the framework of a cooperation between Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, facilitated by the Fisheries Committee for the West Central Gulf of Guinea (FCWC⁹), a joint inspection of the KANBAL III¹⁰ was carried out in the port of Abidjan to verify that the vessel complied with the regulations and that the catches were in conformity with the report of the observers on board. This type of joint inspection, which remains exceptional, is to be applauded in order to prevent vessels from escaping the scrutiny of the inspectors of the country where they are fishing.

5. Economic benefits below expectations for Liberia

These powerful trawlers operate on the deepwater reefs off Greenville for a valuable resource, the deepwater red shrimp (known as Carabineros in Spain), the largest prawn in the world. The free-on-board value of Carabineros is difficult to estimate, but the retail price can be as high as \$80 per kilo.

Under the Senegal-Liberia agreement, the operators of these trawlers, which do not land any catches in Monrovia, are required to pay 10 per cent of the ex-vessel value of the fish caught. The amount paid will depend on the catches declared by the captain and the values realized by the operators. It needs also to be noted that, thanks to the experimental fishing authorization they have, the operators avoid paying the 10% export tax that would be due if they had a regular license.

The only verification of catches is by a single observer on board, - which falls short of what the Liberian law requires for research fishing. In the absence of actual independent verification of catch reports, regardless of the port where the catch is offloaded, and with Liberia foregoing the export tax revenue, the economic benefits that can be realized by Liberia are probably below expectations for the exploitation of such high value resource.

⁸ GREENPEACE AFRICA, "Greenpeace achève une tournée maritime de plusieurs mois par des recommandations fortes à l'endroit des Etats d'Afrique de l'Ouest", Greenpeace Website, 4 May 2017. Only available in French at: <https://www.greenpeace.org/africa/fr/communiqués-de-presse/637/greenpeace-acheve-une-tournee-maritime-de-plusieurs-mois-par-des-recommandations-fortes-a-lendroit-des-etats-dafrique-de-louest/>

⁹ The official website of the FCWC is available at: <https://fcwc-fish.org/>

¹⁰ This inspection was tweeted by the FCWC, see : https://twitter.com/FCWC_CPCO/status/1443873857803374611

Experimental fishing or pillaging in Liberia?

Policy Brief – 26 October 2021



This could change in the future, as on the 19th of October, Liberia signed a financing agreement with the World Bank¹¹ for the Liberia Sustainable Management of Fisheries project, worth US\$ 40 Million. Through this agreement, it is expected that the completion of the Mesurado Pier into an industrial port will allow more than 77 industrial fishing vessels to land their catches in Liberia. Madam Emma Metieh Glassco, Director general of the National Fisheries and Aquaculture Authority (NaFAA), said the three times expansion of the Mesurado Pier will lead to the creation

¹¹ FRONT PAGE AFRICA, "Liberia, World Bank sign U.S.\$40 Million Financing Agreement for Sustainable Management of Fisheries", 20 October 2021. Available at: <https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-world-bank-sign-us40m-financing-agreement-for-sustainable-management-of-fisheries/>

of huge job opportunities for Liberia and Liberians, provide huge supply of fish on Liberian markets at a cheaper rate, reduce the net importation of fish.

However, for the time being, the multi-million dollars profits from the deepwater shrimp catches are almost entirely lost to Liberia.

6. Doubts about the scientific value of this experimental fishery

The methods of payment are not specified in the experimental fishing authorization. Moreover, in contravention of the conditions set for research fishing in Liberia, the operations of the trawlers targeting deep water shrimp have not been subject to a research plan, and thus the data to be collected is not defined. There is also no plan for communicating the results of the research, and there is no specification of the environmental impacts to be monitored in the license conditions.

In summary, the activities of these vessels in Liberian waters are not transparent, and it is highly unlikely that they will produce useful data for resource assessment.

Is the objective really to improve scientific knowledge of the targeted resources, or to find through this 'experimental fishing' a way to exploit their economic potential, by intensively fishing resources of high commercial value?

For Dr. Alassane Samba, fisheries scientist and former director of the Centre de Recherches Océanographiques de Dakar Thiaroye (CRODT) in Senegal, things are clear: *“If experimental fishing is well conducted, it is with scientists who develop the program, execute it, analyze the data and publish the results with documented recommendations. If we go beyond that, it is organized pillaging.”* (Ed. Informal exchange, quoted with permission).