

EAC states now act on overfishing to save stocks in Lake Victoria

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15 Mar 2017

Faced with dwindling fish stocks in Lake Victoria, East African states have moved to institute stringent measures to control fishing in the shared water body.



reinout_dujardin via [pixabay](#) - Lake Victoria, Uganda

Uganda, which controls 45 percent of Africa's largest freshwater lake, has deployed the military to guard its territorial waters and keep foreigners away. This is just one of the government's efforts - including close-down seasons - to allow the fish to breed and grow, even as demand grows in the country and among its neighbours, Rwanda, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Kenya is also considering control measures, which President Uhuru Kenyatta announced last September, upon assenting to the Fisheries Management and Development Act 2016. Kenya controls only 6 percent of Lake Victoria, with Tanzania holding the largest portion - 49 percent. It also boasts the highest number of fishermen in the lake.

Uganda shares Lakes Albert and Edward with DRC on the western border. Lake Albert accounts about 15 percent of the national fish landings. Government officials said that pressure for food and economic survival is pushing more people from the region and the neighbouring DRC into fishing, resulting in overfishing and capture of immature fish.

Diplomatic tensions

The measures Uganda has taken are a potential cause of diplomatic and security tensions, especially with the deployment of the Uganda People's Defence Forces on the disputed Mbingo island on the border with Kenya. But officials say even inland water bodies such as Lake Kyoga in the northeastern region, Lake Albert in the west and other smaller lakes and rivers are also under pressure and need to be conserved.

"The decline in fisheries has led to a drop in incomes, and conflicts among fishing communities. Thirteen fish processing plants have been closed down, which calls for urgent intervention," said Uganda's Agriculture Minister Ssempijja Vincent Bamulangaki. "My ministry has contacted the Ministry of Internal Affairs to control the influx of non-citizens into our fishing areas."

Anthony Taabu Munyaho, director at Uganda's National Fisheries Resources Research Institute, said a six-month fishing ban would allow fish to mature. "But that has to be done immediately because our routine surveillance of fisheries resources has established that between 90 percent and 95 percent of the Nile perch in Lake Victoria are less than 50cm long," he said.

Last June, the EAC launched the Lake Victoria Fisheries Management Plan III (FMP III) 2016-2020 in Arusha to facilitate the recovery of the Nile perch, and ensure that member states sustainably and equitably use the lake.

Commercially viable

Countries are expected to harmonise their positions on issues affecting fisheries and its sustainability. For instance, all countries agree that Nile perch, which is the most commercially viable, should not be harvested until it is 50cm long, or weighing 2kg, regardless of its sources.

Fish processors across the countries have enforced this requirement by rejecting undersize and underweight fish. That, however, has not stopped the undersize fishing, as the fish find markets elsewhere, especially in DRC. Often, the fish is smoked and smuggled across in trucks.

According to scientists, the Nile Perch has the capacity to produce a lot of eggs, so populations can be sustained well if they increase in body weight. The heavier the fish, the more eggs it produces. A 50kg Nile perch produces 7 million eggs at a go, and it is capable of going through the cycle at least thrice a year.

"Six months is a short time to fix the economy and, if fisheries offer the opportunity, then we must get the industry up and running to gain foreign exchange," said the Deputy Secretary to the Treasury.

The other recommended measures are issuance of fishing vessel identification number plates, registration of all boats; identification and gazettement of fish breeding areas, review of fisheries policies and amendment of the Fish Act. In addition, Uganda is providing fingerlings for tilapia and mirror carp and fish feed to farmers. Five private companies, Ugachic, Ferdult, IG Invest, Sabraa and Sons and Jordar Services, have been licensed to process the fish feed.

Declining fish fortunes

East Africa has 36 fish processing companies around Lake Victoria, but only 18 are operating - and below capacity.

Data from Uganda's Fisheries Department shows that the country's fish fortunes have declined significantly over the past three decades.

In 2015, the country harvested 461,000 tonnes of fish, with about 24 percent (111,000) coming from aquaculture. Much of the fish is exported to Rwanda, Burundi, DRC and South Sudan. Exports to the European, US and other markets in 2015

stood at only 17,600 tonnes, valued at \$135 million - a drop from 25,000 tonnes 10 years earlier. Uganda exports fish to the EU, Australia, the Middle East; the US, Egypt and Southeast Asia.

Now, an enforcement committee comprising people from the Fisheries Department, Uganda Revenue Authority, fish processors, police, and UPDF is being deployed to control fishing.

In Kenya, Kenyatta last year said he would use the new fisheries law to protect marine resources. A committee headed by chief of the Kenya Defence Forces was to enforce control of activities on the country's waters. "With this Act in place, we are able to protect our marine resources from exploitation by other nationals at the expense of our people," said the president. "East Africa is not in competition with itself but with the rest of the world."

The Act allows for the creation of an interagency team to monitor and control marine activities, said Robert Wanyama, officer in charge of the Kenya Fisheries Service in Kisumu.

Cage farming

Research by the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI) shows that Lake Victoria's fish stocks on the Kenyan side have declined to 2,500 tonnes annually, from 5,000 tonnes, due to overfishing, illegal fishing gear, fishing in breeding grounds, the water hyacinth and pollution.

Dr Christopher Aura, KMFRI director in Kisumu, said to bridge the gap, fishermen are turning to cage farming. "Cage farming, if done properly, will supplement fish supplies and reduce the pressure on the wild stocks," he said.

Tanzania has also instituted measures to curb fishing in the lake. Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries William ole Nasha said the government has embarked on surveillance to ensure the right fishing gear. Two years ago, Tanzania sought to impose a six-month annual fishing ban in Lake Victoria to raise Nile perch stocks, a move that would be a blow to about 200,000 fishermen. But Dar had to work in concert with Uganda and Kenya to effect the ban.

And now, Uganda has a joint force in place to curb trade in illegal, unregulated and unrecorded immature fish, which is estimated to cause economic losses of up to \$430 million annually. The fish, normally smoked, have ready markets in Burundi DRC, Kenya, Rwanda and South Sudan. Even fish skeletons (*mgogo wazi*) find their way to these markets.

Additional reporting by Emmanuel Onyango and Angela Oketch.

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