

Invasion by sea

Imports of marine fish into land-locked Mali is spelling doom for the traditional freshwater Malian fishers

Although Mali is a land-locked country, fish eating and fisheries-related activities are very important for the local population. According to an FAO study, around 71,000 fishers, operating 25,000 canoes, produce about 100,000 tonnes of fish annually. A further 213,000 people earn their living from fishing-related and ancillary activities.

Mali's per capita fish consumption is estimated to have risen from 6kg/yr in the post-drought 1980s to around 9 kg/yr, about average for sub-Saharan Africa. For many generations, an abundant supply of fish in the major rivers has provided the basis for family-based fish catching, processing and marketing activities. However, according to a recent article in *Bonga* (the fortnightly bulletin of the EU-financed Regional Fish Processing Programme in West Africa), Mali is facing an invasion of marine fish. Imports of sea fish are now strongly competing in the market with locally caught freshwater fish.

There are two main factors which favour imported sea fish over locally caught freshwater fish: supplies are more reliable, and sea fish is cheaper than freshwater fish. In the words of Aminata Kanta, the wife of a local fisherman, "While I can no longer rely on my husband's catch to supply my clients' needs, there is an abundant variety of sea fish for them to—choose from. While locally caught fresh-water fish costs around 1,300 CFA francs/kg, imported sea fish costs only 750 CFA francs/kg. It is not that people prefer sea fish, but it is so much cheaper and meatier."

There are also other reasons for selecting sea fish. Dietary preferences are changing, and *attieke*, a typical Ivory Coast dish, is

becoming increasingly popular. And, as the women fish merchants will not cease emphasizing, you need sea fish to make *attieke*!

Due to its low cost and high demand, trade in sea fish has become a highly popular business. Sea fish now lands in Mali from the Ivory Coast, Senegal and Mauritania. At the moment, fish from Mauritania is particularly cheap, selling for around 450 CFA francs/kg. Customs officials estimate that these countries are supplying several thousands of tonnes of sea fish. In Bamako, the fishmongers are organizing themselves as best as they can. According to one fishmonger in Bamako, "We are constantly ordering fish, but there are only a limited number of agents to supply us with the fish we need."

But it would seem that this is adversely affecting the local fishery. According to Kanta, "There are some days when, come evening, we have to throw away the morning's catch. There is no fridge in my house, and I don't have any alternative way of keeping the fish. All that I can do is to smoke the fish, but there is no price advantage in doing that." She feels that import taxes on fish should be much higher, and that the government should reduce taxes on nets and other fishing gear. For many Malian fishworkers like Kanta, the "invasion of sea fish is proving to be a threat to their livelihoods."

This article has been adapted by Brian O'Riordan of ITDG from 'Invasion du Poisson de Mer' by Alexis Kalambly. *Bonga*, November 1997.