

Sardinella, staple food of West African coastal communities, in dire straits

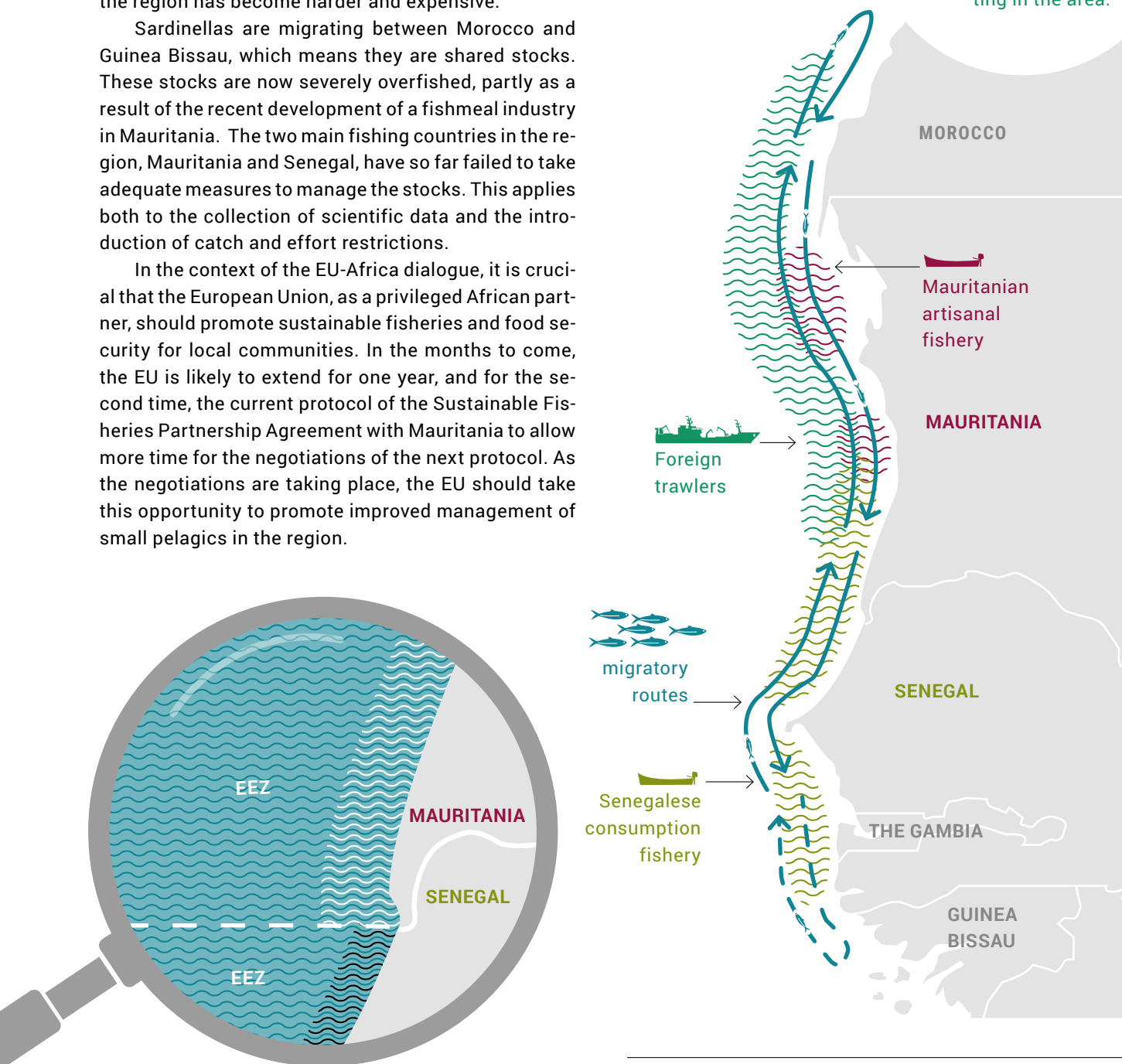
How the EU-Mauritania fisheries agreement can be used to improve the management of these overfished species

Sardinella is a small pelagic fish, staple food for West African communities. Not only it provides vital nutrients, but it also supplies jobs for hundreds of thousands of fishermen, women fishmongers and fish processors along the coast of West Africa. However, in the past ten years, access to fish for local consumption in the region has become harder and expensive.

Sardinellas are migrating between Morocco and Guinea Bissau, which means they are shared stocks. These stocks are now severely overfished, partly as a result of the recent development of a fishmeal industry in Mauritania. The two main fishing countries in the region, Mauritania and Senegal, have so far failed to take adequate measures to manage the stocks. This applies both to the collection of scientific data and the introduction of catch and effort restrictions.

In the context of the EU-Africa dialogue, it is crucial that the European Union, as a privileged African partner, should promote sustainable fisheries and food security for local communities. In the months to come, the EU is likely to extend for one year, and for the second time, the current protocol of the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement with Mauritania to allow more time for the negotiations of the next protocol. As the negotiations are taking place, the EU should take this opportunity to promote improved management of small pelagics in the region.

Distribution and migration of round Sardinella off the coast of North Western Africa and the different fleets operating in the area.



- Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ): 200 Nautical miles (NM)
- Large pelagic trawlers-free zone in Mauritania: 20 NM¹
- Trawling-free zone in Senegal: 12 NM²

[1] During 2020, Mauritania reduced the zone where large pelagic trawlers are forbidden to fish to 15 NM. However, EU trawlers can only fish from 20 NM and on, as per the current protocol.
 [2] Local fishermen call it the "artisanal fishing zone", however this is incorrect as the Senegalese maritime code only forbids trawling activities in these 12 NM.

Fishmeal in Mauritania

2010

Mauritania started to use sardinella to produce fishmeal.

2011

The Chinese company Poly Hondone signed an agreement with Mauritania to start fishing operations and build a fish processing plant that could process 100,000 tonnes a year.

2012

To reserve all its sardinella for the fishmeal industry, Mauritania extended the forbidden coastal zone for foreign trawlers from 13 to 20 miles. Senegalese fishermen were brought over to Nouadhibou to catch sardinella.

2016

Senegalese canoes were replaced by Turkish purse seiners.

2017

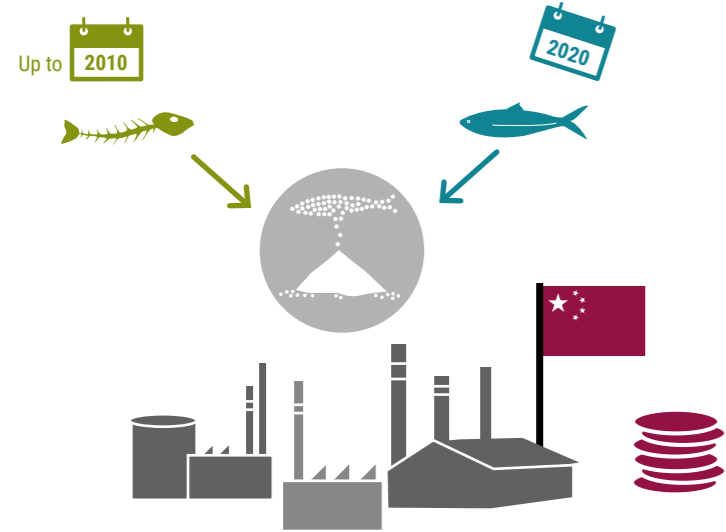
Another Chinese company, Sunrise, established a fishmeal factory 3 times the size of Poly Hondone, and also brought its own fishing fleet.

2018

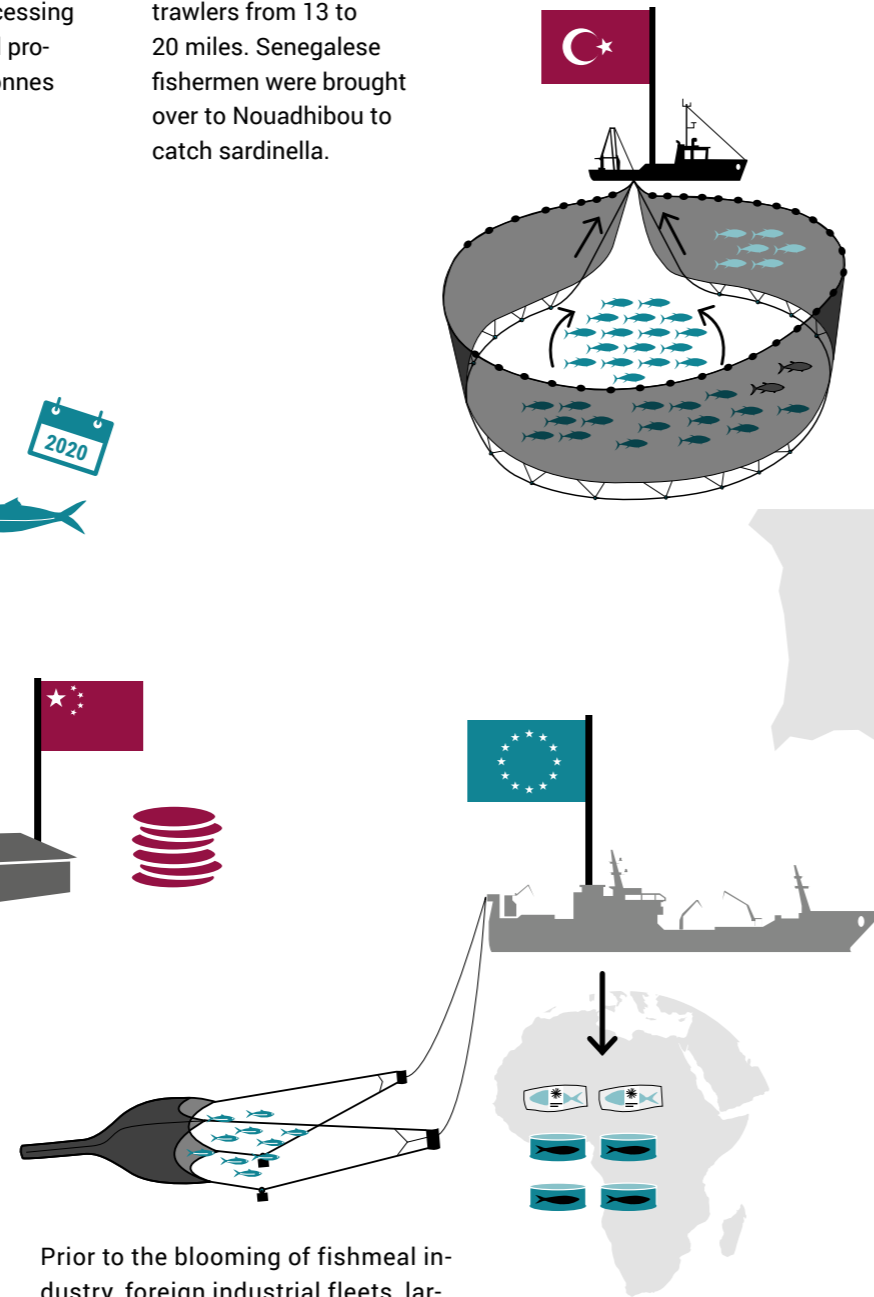
The landings for fishmeal reached a record of 600,000 tons for the fishmeal plants. The Mauritanian institute IMROP only took 19 samples. Following complaints by fishermen about overfishing, Mauritania introduced restrictive measures: Each factory could only process a maximum of 10,000 tons/year of round sardinella. As catches always consist of a mixture of round and flat sardinella, only a ban on using all sardinella for fishmeal would be effective.

2019

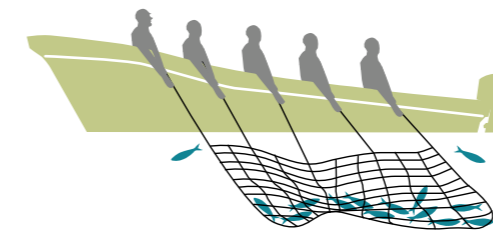
No data are yet available, but catches per day in the artisanal fleet have dropped in Mauritania and in Senegal and acoustic surveys in Mauritania indicate that the stock is at its lowest level in history.



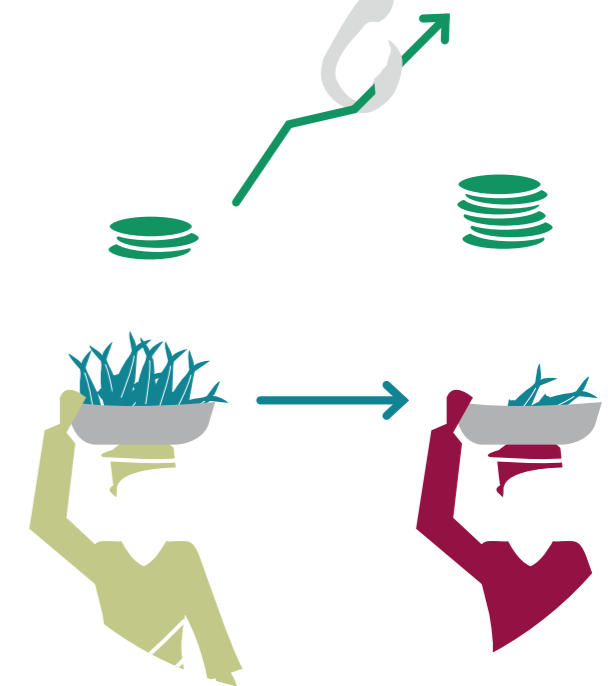
Before 2010, there was only one factory processing waste fish and offcuts. According to local sources, approximately 24 out of 40 factories are currently in operation; most of which are now using whole fish.



Prior to the blooming of fishmeal industry, foreign industrial fleets, large vessels from Europe and Russia, caught the majority of small-pelagic fish, which was then sold frozen or tinned for direct human consumption to African markets.



Round sardinella has been historically caught by Senegalese artisanal fishermen who sold it on local markets. A 24-m pirogue manned by 35 fishermen can catch up to 35 tons. It is roughly estimated that a single pirogue can ensure the livelihoods of 100 people direct and indirectly. However, artisanal fishermen are losing their jobs because of low catches.

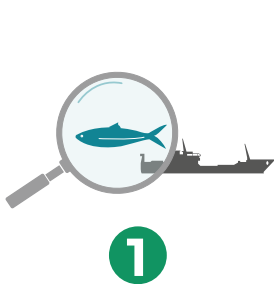


In local markets, sardinella has become scarce and the price has sharply risen. In Senegal and The Gambia, women engaged in the fish smoking industry have less and less access to the fish.

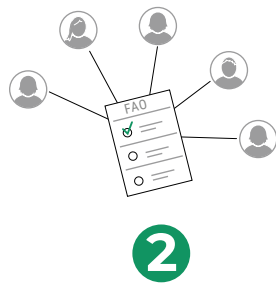
How can the EU help improve (regional) fisheries management?

The EU-Mauritania fishing agreement is the largest of all the EU Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreements (SFPA). Despite the large amounts of money paid so far to Mauritania, both as compensation for the EU fleet access and for the development of the national fishery (sectoral support), there has been little progress in fisheries management.

These stocks are key for food security in the region and are severely strained. While the current protocol of the agreement will likely be extended one more year, the EU should take this opportunity to promote improved management of small pelagics in the region. The new protocol should oblige the Mauritanian government to:



drastically increase sampling of pelagic catches:
Mauritania fisheries research institute IM-ROP should collect the necessary number of samples from landings at the fishmeal plants and from catches by pelagic trawlers.



apply the recommendations of the FAO Working Group on the Assessment of Small Pelagic Fish off Northwest Africa.



start consultations with Senegal on the joint management of sardinella:
The countries must base these measures on the advice of the FAO working group and they must agree on conservation measures (catch or effort limitation).



contribute to regional management efforts by supporting the FAO Working Group:
Since fisheries management and research are national responsibilities, the EU should not take over the funding of national sampling programmes but rather fund activities beyond the means of national governments, such as the regional coordination of research.

Publisher Coalition for Fair Fisheries Arrangements –
Coalition pour des accords de pêche équitables
(CFFA-CAPE)

Chaussée de Waterloo 266, 1060 Brussels, Belgium

Telephone +32 2 652 52 01 / +32 493 390 534

E-Mail secretariat@cffacape.org

Web www.cffacape.org

Author Joëlle Philippe

Reviewer Ad Corten, Beatrice Gorez

Layout Esther Gonstalla (Erdgeschoss Grafik)

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This factsheet was based on an article by Ad Corten, who was head of pelagic research in The Netherlands from 1971 to 1996 and coordinator of the Dutch-Mauritanian cooperation in fisheries from 1998 to 2019. He is a member of the FAO Working Group on the Assessment of Small Pelagic Fish off Northwest Africa and of the EU-Mauritanian Joint Scientific Committee.