

The Dilemma of the Nile Perch

Ecolabelling could be a strategy to secure long-term market access of a fishing sector that secures the livelihoods of around 150,000 fishers in the Nile-perch fishery

10

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) GmbH is an international co-operation enterprise for sustainable development, with worldwide operations. GTZ is a German federal enterprise, and supports the German government in achieving its development-policy objectives. The German Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ) is one of its main clients.

Currently, GTZ is involved in a pilot project in Tanzania to introduce ecocertification in the fishing industry around the Nile perch (*Lates niloticus*), and is

ous ups and downs since its introduction in the 1990s. Consumer opinion shifted between 'fish of the month' and an 'African nightmare', based on the documentary film *Darwin's Nightmare*, which, due to a very negative presentation of the Nile-perch industry and the region, raised a lot of concerns. This article clarifies certain problems, and proposes ecolabelling as a strategy to secure long-term market access for a sector that, at present, secures the livelihoods of approximately 150,000 local fishers.

A lot has been published on the effects of the Nile perch's introduction into Lake Victoria, most of it controversial due to a sudden intense predation and reduction of the unique, indigenous cichlid stocks.

Therefore, opinions range, in general, from criticism as an ecological catastrophe to the appraisal as an economic success story, based on the significance of the fishery for local incomes, employment and export revenue for the riparian States of Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The latter comprised approximately US\$250 mn in 2004. Representatives of the African States repeatedly refer to these facts to stress the importance of the Nile-perch fishing sector.

Chemical use

During recent years, cases of contamination of fish consignments, the outbreak of a local cholera plague, and the alleged use of chemicals during fishing operations led to import bans

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conducting a feasibility study in Senegal about the possibility of ecocertification. In October 2006, GTZ organized a regional workshop in Nairobi to explore the possibility of ecolabelling in Lake Victoria. GTZ is also promoting responsible aquaculture, *inter alia*, through the introduction of environmental and social standards and guidelines for product certification. For example, with the support of GTZ, Naturland initiated their first pilot project for the organic production of shrimp in Ecuador.

The German market for Lake Victoria Nile perch has gone through numer-

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into the European Union, resulting in local unemployment and a huge loss of foreign exchange. A detailed analysis of all the published pros and cons related to the introduction of the Nile perch would be very time-consuming. Therefore, the following statements should be sufficient. Since its introduction into Lake Victoria, the species has established itself well and has become part of the fish fauna. It can no longer be removed or controlled to such an extent that the indigenous cichlids will not be subject to predation. The full history of the introduction is still a bit vague, as the only documentation available concerns the release of a limited amount of perch in February 1954 into Lake Kyoga, which is located downstream of Lake Victoria—at this time still separated by the Owen Falls. Today, Nile perch accounts for about 50 per cent of the landings, followed by the lake sardine (*Rastrineobola argentea*, locally named *dagaa* or *omena*) and larger cichlid species such as the Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*), a species that was also introduced during the 1960s. Lake sardines are today the major staple source of protein supply for the local population, while tilapia are the preferred fish species for consumption in urban centres. In other words, the fish fauna of the lake is not, as is often stated, entirely depleted of all species except the Nile perch. A lot of indigenous fish species have found long-term protection in the rocky shores or overgrown shallow waters of the lake.

The current discussion about Nile perch is clearly dominated by a 'European' point of view, that is, one focused on pure nature and species conservation. Stated facts are often similar to the dialogue concerning animal protection in African nature reserves, in particular, the militant rejection of partly necessary cutback of abundant species that become destructive for people and the environment, for example, elephants. Debates and controversies are both useful and essential, since they draw attention, and may lead to an increased support for African countries in their attempts to cope with the problems. However, the deliberations are often dominated by an inflexible

animal-rights viewpoint. A similar discussion in relation to a proposed culling of dangerous elephants in Malawi led a Chief of the Angoni to make the following statement: "They (the Europeans) love animals more than us."

In a region where the survival of the population is dependent on fishing, and issues like social security or compensation for loss of earnings are non-existent, people see no direct benefit in a fanatic protection of, for example, indigenous cichlids. For that to occur, income from aquarium-fish trade (which has still to be established) or 'cichlid tourism' should exceed income from Nile-perch fishing, which is unlikely to be the case.

A complete ban of the Nile-perch fishery, as demanded by the environmental organization Greenpeace, is not a solution, because the fish has established itself firmly in the ecosystem, and should rather be fished and consumed. It thus makes more sense to make use of the species, while, at the same time, paying attention to social and environmental aspects and, in doing so, trying to improve the livelihoods and living conditions of the local population. To do this, local initiatives for better fisheries management at the village level (beach management groups) and the regional Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization (LVFO), which co-ordinates

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Nile perch accounts for about 50 per cent of the landings from Africa's Lake Victoria

the management efforts of the fisheries departments, should be supported.

An additional prerequisite would be that consumers in Europe are prepared to pay a premium for ecolabelled Nile perch, and that fishermen involved in better fisheries-management practices would benefit from this added value.

Ecolabelling aims at producing and marketing fish in an ecological and socially compatible way. In the case of Lake Victoria perch, a labelling process such as that of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) would be a suitable tool, but it would have to be modified to the conditions of the African small-scale fishery in conjunction with capacity development of accredited local certifiers. An additional prerequisite would be that consumers in Europe are prepared to pay a premium for ecolabelled Nile perch, and that fishermen involved in better fisheries-management practices would benefit from this added value. The prerequisite of the price premium seems to be, meanwhile, accepted, as more and more trade chains and wholesalers have reacted to consumer pressure by offering a variety of MSC-certified products.

GTZ has gained a lot of experience with development co-operation projects in the fisheries sector worldwide. In co-operation with MSC and other partners like the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), GTZ is currently in the process of developing a concept for an increased support of the Developing World Programme of the MSC, which also targets tropical small-scale fisheries like the Lake Victoria Nile perch fishery. In a GTZ-supported stakeholder conference in Nairobi, during 4-6 October 2006, Lake Victoria was chosen for ecolabelling pilot initiatives, implemented under the co-ordination of the IVFO. The regional fisheries organization additionally received a mandate from the fisheries ministers of the riparian States, in July 2006, to assess the potential of ecolabelling.

According to Thomas Maembe, IVFO Executive Secretary, ecolabelling pilot

initiatives are welcome, and will be supported by the States concerned, as transparency, good fisheries management and labelling are seen as tools for long-term market access of Nile perch fisheries products to the important European markets. They are also seen as being of benefit to the population living around the lake, which sometimes hardly has any alternative to fishing.

In this regard, GTZ will co-finance a MSC pre-assessment of Lake Victoria, together with the German processors and importers association, Bundesverband der deutschen Fischindustrie und des Fischgroßhandels e.V. All parties have agreed to participate, and the project will commence once the administrative handling is arranged.

Since March 2007 a pilot project for ecolabelling the Nile-perch fishery in Lake Victoria has been running in Bukoba, Tanzania, in order to gain some first-hand experiences about the bottlenecks. Partners in this process are the European importer, Anova, the local Processor, Vicfish, and the certifier, Naturland. The first results are not expected before end 2007.

In recent months, GTZ has also provided backstop for an MSC initiative in Senegal. In May 2007, a feasibility study for the MSC on Senegalese small-scale fisheries was commissioned. This study is currently in the validation process, and findings will be announced in due course.

For more

gtz.de/en/presse/18444.htm

GTZ Press Release on Certification

www.anovafood.com/page.asp?lStrId=63&lStrArtNr=5.3.&llntMenuStyle=5&llntLevel=11&lStrLang=EN&lStrBuyer=&lStrPagePath=Sustainability%20%3E%20Naturland

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www.ramsar.org/wwd/5/wwd2005_rpt_gnf.htm

Press Release by Global Nature Fund on World Wetlands Day 2005