

The fisheries sector contributes 20% of the total agricultural output and 5% of the GDP



Fish stocks in Uganda's major lakes have dwindled with increasing number of fishing boats and fishermen

Fish stocks sink amid turbulent lake wars

Today is World Fisheries Day. The fish population in Uganda's water bodies has been depleted to almost unsustainable levels, writes Joshua Kato

On a flight from Entebbe International Airport to West Nile, the beauty of Uganda's waters hits a flyer with a nostalgic effect. After take-off, the plane climbs the skies over Lake Victoria, turns north-west and soon, Lake Wamala in Mityana district appears to the south.

Not long after, river Kafu come into view, as does Lake Kyoga. Further, over the Nile, one sees Lake Albert as the plane crosses into West Nile.

These are not the only water bodies that have fish in Uganda. In the west, there is Lake Edward, Lake Mburo and a host of crater lakes while in the east, Lake Bisina and the swamps in Teso contribute a huge amount of fish stocks.

"There are several factors

that have affected the fisheries sector," Musa Muliika, a fish exporter and an advocate of good fishing practices on Lake Victoria, says.

Like the Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries, Muliika says poor administration of the waters has encouraged persistent poor fishing methods.

State of fishing

According to the agriculture

ministry, fisheries contribute 20% of the total agricultural output and 5% of the Gross Domestic Product.

The ministry's records indicate that there are about 35,000 small fishing boats used by about 80,000 fishermen countrywide.

Agriculture minister Vincent Ssempiija says earnings from fish exports has dipped from \$400m (about sh1.5 trillion) to \$150m (about sh545b) over the last 10 years.

Ssempiija, however, says the Government plans to increase the revenue from fisheries to \$800m (about sh3trillion) through proper law enforcement.

Poor law enforcement has led to the proliferation of illegal fishing gear, resulting in overfishing, with a devastating economic effect.

"If we are to benefit from the huge potential of the fisheries sector, we must work with the law enforcers to fight bad

MAFIA-LIKE BUSINESS

In November 2015, the law enforcement system was suspended by an order from State House for failing to stop illegal activities.

In April this year, the Fisheries Patrol Unit (FPU), commanded by Maj. James Nuwagaba, was set up to tackle illegal fishing.

According to fishermen, there are several types and groups of illegal fishing activities.

There is a group who catch fish and sell it locally at landing sites.

Another group deals in the illegal transportation of fish to neighbouring countries.

"The DR Congo market is the most lucrative for these groups. Fish is three times more expensive there than it is in Uganda," Nuwagaba says.

Alex Mukasa, a fisherman, says the transporters of immature fish are dangerous. They are either armed or escorted by armed groups.

He says the people engaged in illegal fishing activities are not more than 200.

They operate like mafias.

fishing," Ssempiija says.

In 2005, Uganda had 26 fish-processing and exporting companies. However, only five are in operation today. The others collapsed due to inadequate fish supplies.

The fisheries report released by the agriculture ministry in July last year shows that fish production from Lake Victoria has followed a zigzag trend in the last 15 years.

While about 150 million tonnes was produced in 2000, there was a sharp rise to about 250 million tonnes in 2004 and a further 350 million tonnes in 2008, before production dropped to 150 million tonnes in 2010.

Since then, production has oscillated around 160 million tonnes.

There is a correlation between the diminishing fish production and the number of fishermen on the lakes.

According to the agriculture ministry, the number of fishing boats has almost doubled, from about 15,000 in 2000 to around 28,000 in 2014. Over the same period, the number of fishermen on the lake more than doubled from 33,000 to about 68,000.

At the same time, the number of nets on Lake Victoria increased sevenfold, from 4,000 in 2000 to 28,000 in 2014.

The picture that comes out of Lake Victoria is mirrored across other major water bodies in Uganda: dwindling fish catches versus increasing number of fishing boats and fishermen.

"What this information shows is that, while there is an increase in measures to get fish out of the water, the amount of fish caught has continued to drop. Obviously, this is as a result of overfishing," Muliika says.

The impact on the fish is big.

"I deal in the exportation of the Nile Perch swim bladder (*nuun*). However, it is now difficult to get the size and quantities that I need because fish stocks have been depleted," Alex Mukasa, a fisherman and an advocate of

better fishing, says.

Regulations bar the use of fishing nets below four inches in diameter on Uganda's lakes. "But such nets are still imported and used," Mukasa emphasises.

Besides the undersized nets, Mukasa says there are also 'electric nets' used on the lakes. These nets are reportedly imported from Asia.

"What happens is that when an 'electric net' is cast into the waters, it attracts any fish that is within a radius of about 30 metres. It does not matter whether the fish is immature or not," Mukasa explains.

MORE FISHERMEN

The reduction of fish stocks is linked to the increasing number of fishermen. The agriculture ministry says the number of fishing boats has nearly doubled. That is part of the bigger problem.

Moving forward

According to Mukasa, the importers of illegal nets are not more than 13, the people who use them do not exceed 100 and the transporters of the fish are less than 35.

"It is a matter of rounding them up and the lake will be fine," he says.

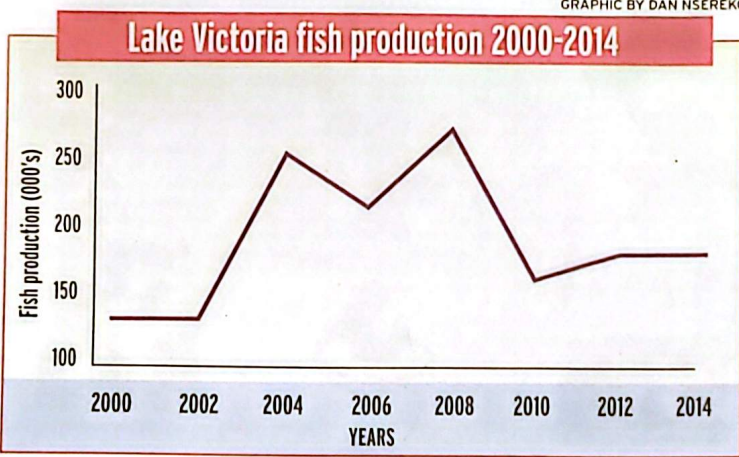
Like most fishermen, Mukasa points out that the Fisheries Patrol Unit (FPU) should work with the fishing community for better results.

"We know what we want. We shall protect it. You cannot bring a pig keeper to milk a cow when you have a cattle keeper in your midst. Let the President involve fishermen in the reorganisation of the fisheries industry," he says.

The campaign by FPU has so far destroyed hundreds of unregistered fishing boats and thousands of illegal nets.

Nuwagaba says reports of bad fishing activities are reducing.

"The bad guys know we are around to get them, so they have reduced their activities."



GRAPHIC BY DAN NSEREKO