



# Sharks, sea turtles rule Mogadishu fish market

By Joshua Kato In Mogadishu

**W**henever I watch television, I always admire the tenacity and ruthlessness of sharks while in water. They seem unbeatable as they wantonly maul other sea creatures. So when I visited the famous fish bay market on the shores of the Indian Ocean, not far away from Mogadishu sea port, I never expected to see sharks being chopped away helplessly.

But here they were on a hot Thursday afternoon, dead, their fins being yanked away for export or for sale to local hoteliers and restaurateurs to make the delicious shark fin soup.

It is not only just sharks at this chaotic fish market. The giant sea turtles, some weighing as many as 50kg, the sword fish, stingray, kingfish, tuna, crabs, etc. are all spread out for sale.

"People are buying sauce for the weekend," one of the traders told me. In Somalia, Friday is the first day of the weekend, so people do most of the shopping on Thursday.

Somalia has a long coastline stretching over 3500km from the south to the north of the war-ravaged Horn of Africa country. It has several fishing bays. The main ones include Mogadishu, Barawe and Adale.

Various surveys by the European Union, Oxfam and Somali government shows Somalia fishing industry has great potential with the return of peace in some areas after over three decades of war, thanks to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) forces.

"The returning peace is making it possible for fishermen to venture deeper into the ocean," says Mohammed Ahmed Bergan, a fishmonger. He pointed out that pirates on the seas had made fishing in deep waters dangerous, but these have been reducing since 2012.

### Sea of activity

The fish bay is a sea of activity. There is offloading of fish from a motley of boats outside the market. Some parts of the market floor is tiled. The hoisted cemented platforms act as cutting boards for fish. The floor of the market is bloody. Customers of all ages - men, women and children - are buying fish. Sometimes the noise, both from humans and from sharp pangas chopping at the fish becomes unbearable.

In one corner, there are two men seemingly quarrelling over ownership of a piece of what looks like a stingray.

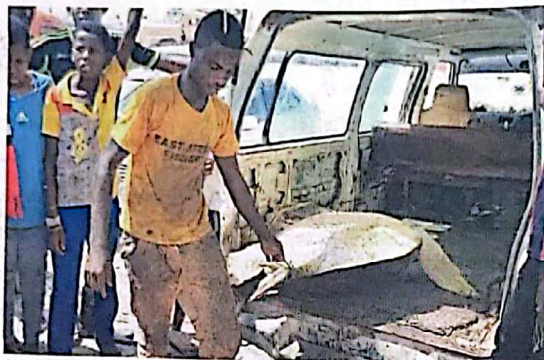
### Huge stingrays

In the fishy confusion, a young man saunters in, heaving at the weight of a portion of some fish. It is a part of a stingray, cut in four halves. "This was mature," he says.

The part he carried weighed about 30kg. That is too much for what I thought about stingrays. However, he murmured to me that they have

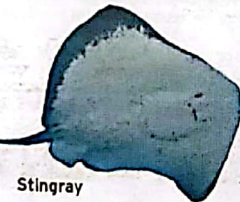


Some of the landed sharks with fins chopped off on sale at the fish market



A fisherman offloads a giant sea turtle

*The sharks are attracted by the blood flowing into the ocean from the several camel and donkey butcheries on the coastline*



Stingray

caught some larger ones, weighing around 300kg. I had only seen this in water on TV and it never looked that big.

### Miserable sharks

It is, however, the miserable sharks, lying helpless on the floor that draw my deep sympathy. There is a tiger shark, about 50kg, there is even a hammerhead shark too. Their jaws widely open, but harmless. Their tiny, greyish eyes motionless.

"Are you not scared of these monsters?" I asked.

"They rule the waters, but we rule the land," retorts one of the fish mongers as he makes a clean cut off of the top fin. Indeed, sharks rule

the Somali waters, including the coastline. The fishermen do not have to go too deep into the ocean to trap them.

"We have had sharks attacking people swimming on the coastline in recent years," says Lt Dan Kama, who served with the UPDF under AMISOM.

In one such attack, a shark went off with the leg of a UN employee who was swimming along the shoreline, near the end of the Mogadishu Airport runway.

Apparently, the sharks are attracted



Swordfish

by the blood flowing into the ocean from the several camel and donkey butcheries on the coastline. And as they rule the waters, their body parts rule the fish markets.

Ahmed Abdullah, a fish monger, tells me that the fins are sold separately because of their nutrition value.

He says a kilogramme of shark fins

goes for as much as \$100 (about sh360,000).

However, according to fishermen, this is cheap compared to say if one is buying the same at Mombasa or Lamu. At Mogadishu, a shark can go for as much as \$300.

### Large fish stocks

Oxfam says the Somali fishing industry has a high potential for growth and job creation. Though it is not among the top three contributors to the country's GDP, the Somali coast line is the longest in Africa.

According to the latest Oxfam survey, some of the only fish stocks in the world that are actually "under-fished" are in the deep waters off the Somali coast.

Large schools of primarily tuna migrate from north to south and back along the east coast of Africa. It is no doubt home to an extensive list of fish species, including lobster, swordfish, shark and many others.

"The Somali fisheries resource remains largely underexploited partly due to the absence of good infrastructure for post-harvest management, despite the fact that there is growing local, regional and international demand for fish," Nimo Jirdeh, the policy and advocacy adviser, Oxfam Somalia says.

Success will depend on exports, which in turn will depend on the ability of Somali producers to meet international standards for food safety. At the moment, most of the fish at Mogadishu fish bay is sold to domestic consumers and hotels in the city.

At fishing bay in Mogadishu, there is no sign of any value-addition. Instead, the fish is cut into different 'favourite' parts and sold off to buyers from as far as Ethiopia. "I want shark fins," a woman screams. A man with a sharp-sea knife cuts them off and the woman hands him a wad of Somali cash.

### BRIGHT FUTURE IN THE FISHING INDUSTRY

The Somali government sees a bright future in the fishing industry if a naval force is set up and the sector is properly regulated.

"We need government-owned and controlled ocean patrols to regulate fishing on the ocean," Abdi Ali Raghe, the maritime security co-ordination focal point officer in the office of president Mohamed Farmajo, says.

According to a joint European Union and Oxfam survey, Somali waters are home to some of the richest fishing grounds in Africa, with vast potential for fisheries and coastal area development.

However, the sector remains underdeveloped due to lack of skills and appropriate gear for the fishermen to go deep into the ocean.