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The Demise of the Traditional Fisher Peoples

**Andrew Johnston
Artisanal Fishers Association
Republic of South Africa**

The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world, with the bulk of the supply for domestic consumption of fish coming from the traditional/artisanal fishers. Fish is the most vital source of cheap protein, contributing essential minerals and vitamins to the most vulnerable people of the poorer coastal communities. The plight and existence of the artisanal/traditional fishers and the fish resources are being ignored, while large funding is spent to defend failed policies and management systems that promote unsustainable fisheries. Treaties and agreements are ignored and, moreover, conferences that attempt to resolve and take the necessary steps to protect and promote sustainable fisheries and the communities dependent upon them are boycotted by countries embracing industrialization.

But a calamity is evolving through the global destruction of our ocean's waters and marine life. It is especially notorious around the west coast of Africa and within the Indian Ocean and surrounds. Overfishing and environmental degradation are quickly depleting our fish stocks. Sharks, swordfish, abalone, orange roughy, patagonia toothfish, bluefin tuna and turtles are just some of the species that are being harvested in prolific quantities, with reckless abandon. In the southern seas, plundering by pirate fishing vessels has escalated with the full knowledge and support of some the Indian Ocean countries, with Port Louis (Mauritius) and Cape Town (South Africa) being eminent as bases for chemical pollution, with the ocean being regarded as a trash bin for the dumping of all sorts of harmful waste. We are not only destroying the earth's life support system, or the precious resources within it, but the rich cultural heritage, and livelihood of innumerable communities that are dependent on it.

A grave tragedy is unfolding as attempts by so-called "developed" countries to transform the traditional/artisanal fisher peoples into a corporate society. Industrial profiteers and governments continue to promote the concept that developing countries must evolve into developed nations.

With the exception of a few urban areas, the coast of East Africa is not densely populated, but in South Africa, the Indian Ocean islands, and Kenya, rapid irresponsible coastal development to serve tourism and local clients result in an accelerated rate of environmental degradation and habitat loss. Food security is threatened to the extent that most of the African, Caribbean and Pacific peoples' supply of fish, the basic staple food and nutrition, is now not available for local consumption but destined for the palates of the rich nations of the north. Policies ignore social issues, but focus on production for economic growth, the primary concern being expounding industrial fisheries.

Very little of the profits and foreign exchange generated by fish export markets benefit the local fishers and fishing communities. The structure of the fishing operations required to compete internally excludes and marginalizes the small-

scale fishing sector. In South Africa, the artisanal/traditional fishers are not accommodated as a sector within its fishing acts, and there is no meaningful participation or involvement by this group in decision-making and implementation of fishing management.

A government that shows no respect for the environment will show even less respect for its fellow human beings. It is now, before it is too late, to stand together as concerned people to demand governments to change global economic rules to defend and promote sustainable fisheries, to avoid environmental degradation, to safeguard the rights of the small-scale fishers and protect our marine resources for the benefit of future mankind.