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Improved Fisheries Management in the Barotse Floodplain of Zambia – An Urgent Call for Action



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An estimated 70,000 people depend on the resources of the Barotse floodplain for their livelihood, food and nutrition security. However, poor management, increasing fishing pressure and use of destructive fishing gears have caused rapid declines in fish stocks. Policy-makers, decision-makers, donors, local leaders, NGOs and community-based organizations are urged to take immediate action to ensure that current fisheries regulations are implemented effectively to reverse the serious decline in the economic health of the Barotse fisheries.

The fish resources of the Barotse

The Barotse Floodplain of the Upper Zambezi River is the second largest wetland in Zambia. The floodplain supports a large fishery based on some 80 fish species, including high value tilapias (breams), that generate food, income and employment for 70,000 people. It has recently been slated to become a World Heritage Site due to its unique cultural landscape and the special relationship between the local people and their environment.

There is growing evidence from several sources – changes in catch composition, declines in fish size, smaller catches and reduced catches per unit effort – that the fish stocks upon which the Barotse fishery depends have declined rapidly in recent years. The reasons for the decline, although poorly studied, are widely accepted as being due to overfishing and ineffective fisheries management. Climate change and environmental degradation are also likely to play a part. The decline is now known to have reached very serious levels.

Opportunities for fisheries co-management

The decline in the Barotse fish stocks is acutely felt by the fishers, processors and traders who rely on the fisheries for their livelihoods. There is great desire at the local level, not only among the fishing communities themselves, but also by the Barotse Royal Establishment (BRE) and Department of Fisheries, to restore the fishery. In many meetings with the communities, there is an increasingly loud call for people to work together to salvage the fish stocks.

The BRE and Department of Fisheries have been cooperating effectively in recent months to promote a co-management system involving BRE, Department of Fisheries, and local communities. The 2011 Fisheries Act promotes such an approach to fisheries management, and efforts are currently underway to establish community committees through which local people play a role in enforcing existing regulations. An effective co-management system may take several years to put in place. In the meantime, there is an urgent need for immediate measures to ensure that the fishing ban is observed and fish stocks are allowed to recover through natural breeding.

The need for action

If immediate action is not taken, fish catches will decline further, resulting in reduced incomes for fishers, processors and traders, and more expensive fish for all. In the short-term, communities, local leaders, fisheries authorities and researchers must all work together to:

- Ensure all fishers and traders in the fishery observe the fishing ban (1st December – 28th February);
- Remove illegal fishing gears from the fishery;
- Implement provisions of the Fisheries Act of 2011 by establishing fisheries co-management systems in the area, drawing on indigenous knowledge and practices.

Get involved!

- Keep raising the issue of fisheries management at community meetings, arguing for adherence to fishing rules;
- Contact the Fisheries Department over infringements;
- Support your fisheries officers.



Fishers using an illegal sefa sefa net: this type of net is highly destructive to fish stocks because fish of all sizes are caught, including immature fish and even eggs.

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Small squeakers being dried: the sale of this less palatable species occurs when preferred fish species are in short supply. It is a sign of overfishing.



Immature breams: future fish stocks are threatened by catching fish that have not yet reached the age at which they breed.

With communities, changing lives

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