

THE NATION

Fishy business

by **Bobby Kabango** 30/07/2021 in **Front Page, National News**

It takes just a golden handshake with village chiefs and some officials in the fishing governance structure to buy a licence and partake in the illegal, but lucrative fishing industry in Lake Malawi.

As part of an undercover sting operation, *The Nation* tested the system by bribing its way into fishing using illegal gear and gaining access to the deep blue waters where fishing is supposed to be prohibited, including when some parts of the lake are closed off during the breeding season.



Fishermen dries fish

But little do the members of the local fishing communities, who participate in aiding and abetting the illegal fish harvests, know that the golden handshakes are shooting them in the foot.

That is the case because while the lake's waters may be there for decades, it would be of much lower economic value without its prized inhabitant—fish.

Based on findings from our month-long investigations and various reports, the writing is on the wall that all is not well on Lake Malawi and its fish, hence

something needs to be done urgently to avert the impending catastrophe on the lake of stars.

Meanwhile, Capital Hill is aware of the impending disaster with both Minister of Forestry and Natural Resources Nancy Tembo and director of fisheries Friday Njaya acknowledging how the governance structures have been hooked with corruption money.

Commenting on the issue in an interview, the minister said: “If those tasked to enforce regulations are getting bribes, then this is worrisome. We are in trouble.”

Equally worried is Njaya who said in an interview that his department has been trying to come up with different measures to bring sanity on the lake, “but still people find ways of bringing illegal gear”.

He said: “We came up with a BVC [Beach Village Committee] team, but as you are putting it, they also have been captured. This is a sad moment.”

Njaya said every year they inspect all trawlers and issue licences after the exercise, yet “still you will find others operating on the lake without papers”.

A 2020 report titled *The Spirit of Malawi* by Susan Dalgety estimates that over 90 percent of fishing gear on the lake are illegal and openly operated in full view of the Fisheries Department, police, BVCs and other organisations empowered to enforce legislation.

According to the report, the number of licensed pair trawl units in the South East and South West arms of Lake Malawi (Monkey Bay and Mangochi) are five times greater than those recommended by stock assessment.

Further, the report states that since the 1980s the annual fish harvests from Lake Malawi have dropped by 93 percent, attributing the decrease to illegal fishing.

Reads the report: “Furthermore, these pair trawl units are using engines which are much more powerful [100hp as opposed to 27hp] than originally designated.”

Yet, Malawi has one of the most progressive and strict legal and regulatory framework, according to experts in the field.

In its 2019 Country Environment Assessment (CEA) for Malawi, the World Bank says Malawi now has some of the toughest in the Southern African Development Community (Sadc) region to protect its fish, but the problem is implementation.

For instance, from the 1970s to the early 1990s, chambo catch from Lake Malawi was usually around 30 000 metric tonnes, according to the report. Now the catch

is sometimes as low as 2 000 metric tonnes per year while overall catch levels between 2006 and 2016 in Lake Malawi were static.

The report shows that fish catches in Lake Chilwa and the Shire River have equally declined dramatically over the years.

It also notes that volatility in catches affects fish consumption. That is in part because of how the dwindling supplies have pushed up the price of fish out of the reach of most Malawians, half of whom survive on less than a dollar per day.

According to Dalgety's paper published in December 2020, between 1990 and 2018, the cost of chambo fish has jumped 25 times from \$0.12 (25 tambala at the time) in 1990 to at least \$3 (more than K2 000) in 2018.

Says the report: "In the 1970s, fish consumption was at 14 kilogrammes per person per year and fish contributed 70 percent of the animal protein consumed by Malawians. In 2013, fish consumption was around 7.6 kg per person per year—a fall of nearly 50 percent."

According to the 2021 Malawi Government Annual Economic Report, Malawi has dropped on fish supply per capita from 12.65 kg per person per year in 2018 to 9.5kg, which is below the recommended 15kg of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The report says the cumulative catch by December 2020 showed that over 93.88 percent of the total catch originated from Lake Malawi when artisanal and commercial production figures are added, while the other water bodies of Lake Malombe—an oxbow lake on Shire River, Lake Chilwa, Lake Chiuta and Shire River system contributed minimal figures of 2.28 percent, 1.82 percent, 0.93 percent and 1.09 percent respectively to the total catch. Thus, Lake Malawi continues to be the major source of fish for the country.

The bank's report blamed local fisheries governance structures for the dwindling fish levels.

It says the decline in the chambo population in Lake Malawi has been driven by overfishing. This is a problem when fishing occurs during the chambo breeding season, which destroys the chambo breeding nests.

The widespread use of large shore seine nets with extremely small meshes also contributes to the declining population, says the report.

The revised National Fisheries and Aquaculture Policy provides opportunities to address some of the key drivers that affect the decline in fish stocks.

The policy seeks to marry increasing fish production with initiatives that will control inappropriate fishing technologies, monitor the impact of pollution and environmental changes, and develop capacity of the government and local institutions to manage fisheries resources better.

Our Investigations

While the problem of illegal fishing is national, our investigations zeroed in on Monkey Bay and the wider Mangochi area where it was established that fishers and businesspersons without legal fishing documents and authorised gear cart home tonnes of fish every day with the aid of corrupt traditional leaders and public officers.

Our entry point was Boadzulu beach site in Monkey Bay on June 9 2021.

Masquerading as a fish dealer, our journalist arrived at 7am at the house of the area's community-policing member, the man who acts as a surveillance and alerts his team on what is happening on the lake.

But on this day, he was a fixer and agreed to link me to some authorities who could help him get fish from the lake.

He explained that many stakeholders have their eyes on the lake—meaning that various groups of people have vested interests in the fish stock in the lake.

To join the business, he said one has to follow a few steps.

“The first stage is to meet the village head, then the chairperson of the beach village committee [BVC] and, lastly, the [local] fisheries boss,” said the community-policing member.

He also opened up that there would be need for something [a golden handshake] when meeting some of those people.

For him to take me through the system, he asked for cash, and I gave him K8 000 (US\$10), which he happily received.

At around 9am on the day, we went to the house of the village head, apparently, the authority who wields power to hire and fire BVC members.

The village head asked for my full particulars: names and where I was coming from, including my village. When all was provided, the middle-aged man started “talking real business”—welcoming me to his site.

After I parted with a golden handshake of K20 000 (US\$25), he assured me of his full support and protection.

“Usually, when government officials are coming to monitor the situation on our lake, they alert us, so we will be tipping you not to go on the lake on those particular dates. You have done well by following all procedures,” the village head assured.

I observed that his house was full of fishing gear.

The next stage was to meet the BVC chairperson, but he was not around. I waited until 2pm when he showed up. He was also happy that I had followed “the right steps” before going onto the lake. And he assured me that he would alert his colleagues about my presence, so that they welcome me into the fold.

But I told him my trawler is not licensed and I wanted to use tiny nets. To which he said there was no problem.

“Don’t worry, this site has only 11 licensed trawlers, yet we have allowed over 50 trawlers to operate here,” he said.

Loosening up in the course of our chat, he disclosed that some of those operating at the site are agents of well-known politicians, “and some have no licences. Some have licences, but they are allowed to fish in prohibited areas”.

He assured me that by going through his office I had bought freedom to fish at any site.

The plan was for me to hire a pair of trawlers, but I failed as the owner was asking for K1.5 million (US\$1850) per day. All his trawlers are not licensed.

I later made a deal with another fisher who has a smaller illegal trawler, with banned nets, at a deposit of K15 000 (US\$18.50), so that I could be the first to buy his fish. It was a done deal.

I went to the fishing area at around 4pm the same day and by 5pm I saw trawlers returning. It was time to buy fish. By that time the port area had about 19 vehicles waiting for the fish.

In the four hours I was at the port, 18 trawlers came and people from as far as Lilongwe, Salima and Blantyre bought fish. I learnt that one fisher could pocket as much as K18 million (US\$22,000) per day.

I bought my fish at around 6pm from the man whose trawler I hired. I paid him K70 000 (US\$86) and agreed that I would book for another lot the following day.

While all this business was happening with absolute abandon, Fisheries Conservation and Management Regulations state that there shall be no use of trawl or ring net between 5pm and 7am.

I returned home with 14 species of fish, according to a local 'expert' who identified them. Some of the fish species I brought home are protected; hence, not supposed to be caught, but here the palm-oiling of the people that matter allows everything to happen.

The lake has over 800 endemic fish species, which are of both local and international scholarly importance and also act as a source of tourism attraction. Some fish species, such as Mbuna, are exported outside the country.

The following morning I remembered to call the fisheries boss, lest I lose my illegal access to the lake.

Our conversation materialised quickly and I offered him K15 000 (US\$18.50), which he declined because, according to him, it does not matter whether the trawler is large or small—the payout would still have to be K20 000 (US\$25).

“Send K20 000,” he said. The official later acknowledged receiving the money I had sent to him through a mobile phone transaction.

Such is how the fish stocks in Lake Malawi are being depleted on a daily basis—with the help of the very people the taxpayer is paying to protect the fish.