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<https://blueventures.org/pilot-trawling-ban-is-not-renewed-threatening-traditional-fisheries-around-the-indian-oceans-largest-locally-managed-marine-area/>



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Madagascar's largest protected area, the Barren Isles Locally Managed Marine Area (LMMA) in northwest Madagascar, was lauded by the national Government on its creation in 2014 for pioneering a new model for marine resource management. By providing a collaborative management platform, LMMAs unite communities and their organisational partners under a set of common goals. At the World Parks Congress in Sydney the President of Madagascar, His Excellency Mr. Hery Rajaonarimampianina, [praised the LMMA](#) model for its benefits to food security, promoting community empowerment and fostering grassroots leadership.

The Barren Isles LMMA broke new ground in terms of its ambition and scale. It was awarded [preliminary protected status](#) from the Government of Madagascar – the first step on the road to definitive protection – in November 2014, resulting in the cessation of industrial trawling across over 4,300 km² of islands and ocean, including some of Madagascar's most important coral reefs. With the exception of a trawling corridor running between the islands and the mainland, the waters around the Barren Isles and the coastal town of Maintirano were

protected from industrial fishing, helping to uphold the rights and traditional livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities.

Despite its achievements, the protected area's design was widely criticised by fishing communities for its failure to exclude shrimp trawling from the inshore corridor, which includes some of the most important fishing grounds near Maintirano. While pressure from traditional fishers was steadily mounting, a regional fisheries management plan was ratified by authorities in 2016, the product of extensive consultation and dialogue between stakeholders. A key result for small-scale fishers was an agreement by members of the shrimp industry association GAPCM (Groupement des Aquaculteurs et Pêcheurs de Crevettes de Madagascar) to extend the [trawling ban to the inshore corridor](#) for a trial period of one year, protecting traditional fishing grounds from the coast to the islands – an additional 500 km².

While only a pilot agreement, this voluntary closure of the corridor marked an historic step for Madagascar's shrimp fleet, with GAPCM supporting community efforts to rebuild stocks in critical traditional fishing grounds and mangroves adjacent to the protected area. This was a progressive move towards a more sustainable fishery, setting forth the first – and currently the only – replicable model for mitigation of the longstanding conflicts between traditional and industrial fishing sectors, consistent with the President of Madagascar's commitment to scale up locally led marine protection.

Yet at a meeting between Blue Ventures, GAPCM and the Ministry for Aquatic Resources and Fisheries in Mahajanga in February 2018 to discuss continuing the trawling exclusion for a second year, the decision was made to reopen the inshore corridor to industrial vessels.

Mongabay Series: [Conservation in Madagascar](#)

Will Madagascar's industrial shrimp trawlers make way for local fishers?

by Edward Carver on 14 March 2018

- *Shrimp is one of Madagascar's most lucrative exports.*
- *But local fishers and environmental groups say shrimp trawlers are harming the country's marine environment and leaving too few fish in the sea for the fishing communities that depend on them.*
- *Until now, relatively little has been done to address the issue.*
- *But there are small signs that may be starting to change, with fishing communities raising their voices to press for exclusive access to Madagascar's coastal waters.*

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar — For most people on the west coast of Madagascar, fishing is life. When the sun creeps over the horizon each morning, the men are already out in pirogues,

many bearing canvas sails painted in the red, green and white of the Madagascar flag. Some families travel the coastline, past spiny forests and mangrove swamps, to find the best catch. In temporary camps and coastal villages, people live in thatched-roof huts and sleep on raffia mats directly atop the sand, sacrificing certain comforts in order to be close to the sea. But the sea isn't as plentiful as it once was, and they believe they know why.

Industrial shrimp vessels have been trawling Madagascar's west coast since the 1960s. They cruise near the shore, dragging the seabed with their nets — a technique that [scientists have compared to clear-cutting a forest](#). Usually, they catch Indian white prawn (*Penaeus indicus*) or speckled shrimp (*Metapenaeus monoceros*), freeze it on board, and export it to Europe.

Local fishers and environmental groups say the trawlers are harming Madagascar's marine environment and the fishing communities that depend on it. Until now, though, relatively little has been done to address the issue. Marine conservation efforts, which have been [well funded in recent years](#), have focused on improving resource management and fishing techniques in coastal villages rather than on pressuring shrimp companies to change their practices. But there are small signs that this may be starting to change, with the industry agreeing to a temporary no-trawl zone in 2017 and fishing communities raising their voices to press for further restrictions.

“Industrial fishing poses an existential threat to vulnerable fishing communities in low income countries like Madagascar, where many people have no economic or subsistence alternative to fishing for survival,” Alasdair Harris, a tropical marine ecologist and the executive director of Blue Ventures, a conservation group working in Madagascar, told Mongabay. “I'm dismayed by the lack of attention the environmental sector gives this issue,” he said in a later email.

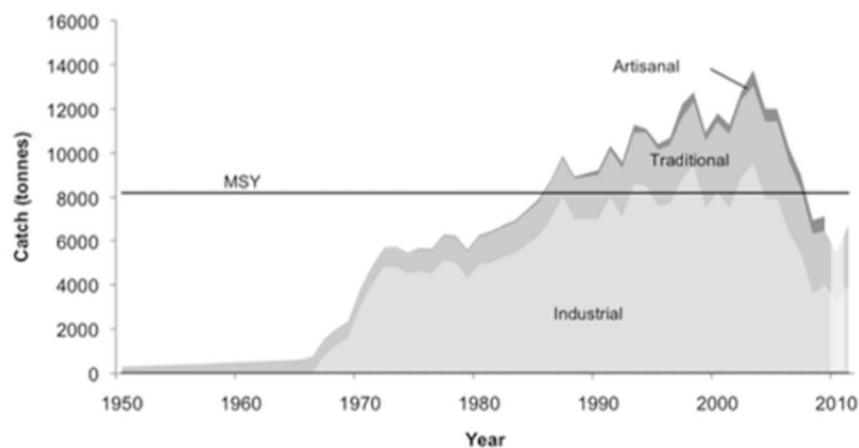


A traditional fisher keeps an eye on a shrimp trawler operating close to shore on Madagascar's west coast. Photo by Garth Cripps.

The trawlers' footprint

Madagascar's trawlers work in the same shallow waters where most traditional fishing takes place. They use twin-rigged nets with heavy "doors" that keep the nets open as they drag the seabed. Globally, the technique has drawn criticism because of [findings](#) that it destroys habitat, damages the seabed, disrupts nutrient cycling, and reduces species' productivity, size and biodiversity, especially if it continues over long periods.

Madagascar's shrimp catches fell dramatically in the mid-2000s. The World Bank called it a "collapse," the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) a "crisis." Since then, the number of full-size trawlers has dropped by almost half, and the industry's "mini-trawlers" have stopped working entirely. The catch has fallen in part because of this reduced "fishing effort," but the main problem is simply that there is less shrimp to go around.



Source: Le Manach et al, 2012

Madagascar shrimp landings since 1950 compared to the maximum sustainable yield (MSY). The shrimp catch crashed sharply in the mid-2000s. Chart courtesy of Frederic Le Manach.

There is no research that definitively assigns blame for the collapse. The industry argues that it was due to local fishers extracting timber from mangrove forests, which act as shrimp nurseries, and using fishing gear that captures large amounts of juvenile shrimp.

For their part, the traditional fishers complain that catches not only of shrimp but also of fish have declined, and they pin the blame squarely on the trawlers. They have some science on their side. A 2012 [paper](#) in the journal *Marine Policy* concludes that habitat destruction and the capture of unintended species, or bycatch, by Madagascar's shrimp trawlers threatens the availability of fish for local people.

In 2016, more than 60 percent of the trawlers' take was bycatch, according to government statistics based on company logs. But that's a significant improvement over years past. In 1998, for example, trawlers collected more than four times more bycatch than shrimp, according to figures in the *Marine Policy* study.

The decline in bycatch stemmed in part from the introduction of bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) in the 2000s, but there are signs that compliance with BRD rules is imperfect. In recent years, the shrimp trawlers have begun seeking out commercial-grade fish; they have started viewing BRDs as a nuisance, and often do not deploy them correctly, according to a [2010 FAO report](#). The upshot, local fishers say, is that trawlers are leaving too few fish in the sea.



Fishing boats in the town of Beheloke in southwestern Madagascar. Photo by Rowan Moore Gerety for Mongabay.

Power imbalance

Whether trawling near the Madagascar coastline is even legal is unclear. In the past, industrial fishing was banned within 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) of the shore. Many conservationists and local fishers still cite the 2-mile rule, but it is not followed in practice. Eighty-five percent of the country's shrimp fishing grounds occur within that zone, where local fishers make their living, so disregarding or eliminating the rule has been crucial to the industry's survival.

Legal ambiguity is systemic in Madagascar's fisheries sector. "The policy and legal framework governing the sector is incoherent and ambiguous," a 2013 World Bank report states. "There is no official document that states the Government's fisheries sector policy." A new fishing code was drafted in 2015, but the rules remain uncertain. Nanie Ratsifandrihamanana, country director for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), told Mongabay she has repeatedly asked the fishing ministry to clarify which version of the code went into effect, if any, but she has not received a clear answer.

Last year, Madagascar's shrimp industry exported \$25 million worth of trawled shrimp from Madagascar, mainly to Europe; roughly \$300,000 went back to the fishing ministry via

licensing fees. The shrimp companies, though locally registered, have substantial foreign capital, according to the FAO. The industry also employs about 1,500 people. Between the money and the jobs, shrimp trawling has enough clout with the government to essentially write its own ticket.

The shrimp lobby, [Groupement des Aquaculteurs et Pêcheurs de Crevettes à Madagascar](#), helps to set the rules, co-managing the shrimp fishery with Madagascar's [fishing ministry](#). The lobby also has a representative on the board of the Fisheries Surveillance Center, the arm of the ministry that monitors the industry.

“No violations have been identified recently because all of the shrimp trawlers operating in Madagascar are Malagasy flagged, and they follow the rules, most of which come from their proposals,” Harimandimby Rasolonjatovo, the center's executive director, wrote in an email to Mongabay.

The center has limited capacity to enforce trawling regulations: it has only two boats to cover Madagascar's entire 5,000-kilometer (3,000-mile) coastline. It does check the trawlers' equipment at the start of the season and keeps an eye on their locations via radio transmitters they are required to carry. But, in general, the center does not have enough money or resources to monitor the trawlers, Rasolonjatovo said. The center employs over 80 people but had a budget of just \$600,000 in 2017, less than half of its annual budget in the 2000s. (It will, however, receive more than \$5 million from the World Bank over the next six years.)

While the industry proposes the rules, traditional fishers have little influence and no formal role in government discussions about fisheries management. There is a “power imbalance” between small- and industrial-scale fishers, Ratsifandrihamanana of WWF told Mongabay.

Harris of Blue Ventures believes this is unfair. “Disenfranchised coastal populations rarely have a voice against the power and influence of industrial fishing operations,” he said.

The shrimp lobby did not respond to requests for comment for this article, and high-level officials in Madagascar's fishing ministry declined to comment. (Disclosure: This reporter worked for Blue Ventures from 2014 to 2015.)



The Fisheries Surveillance Center headquarters in Madagascar's capital city of Antananarivo. Photo by Edward Carver for Mongabay.

Exclusive fishing for coastal villages

In the last 15 years, NGOs — mainly Blue Ventures and WWF — have spent millions of dollars on community-based marine conservation on the west coast of Madagascar. Much of it has been aimed at changing the behavior of small-scale fishing communities and improving their ability to manage local fishing grounds.

But local managers still can't stop outsiders from coming in and taking what they want. No-trawl zones or an outright ban on trawling could change this equation. "The exclusion issue is important because community-based conservation is more likely to work if the users enjoy exclusive access rights to the resource and have a stake in conserving the resource," Fikret Berkes, a researcher at the University of Manitoba, wrote in a [2007 paper](#) in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

However, figuring out how to help secure exclusive access rights for fishing communities has not been easy for NGOs. Harris of Blue Ventures says there are major risks to working on such "politically charged matters" as industrial fishing. International NGOs need government approval to continue working in Madagascar, and taking aim at a favored industry could get a group thrown out of the country.

Ratsifandrihamanana sees WWF as a sort of neutral arbiter in the dispute over access rights. "[W]e see our role as promoting a dialogue between all stakeholders (industry, communities, government) and in doing this, it is critical that we are not seen as promoting the interests of one group more than or versus the other," she told Mongabay in an email.

Advocacy is risky not just for organizations but for the individuals within them. There are few white-collar fisheries jobs in Madagascar and those who establish themselves tend to shuffle between industry, government and non-profit work. People are understandably cautious about criticizing other stakeholders. Several mid-level NGO staff interviewed for this article emphasized that they wanted to work with the industry, not against it, saying things like, "It's a dialogue, not an argument," or "Advocacy could hurt our relationships."



Local fishers in the town of Beheloke in southwestern Madagascar. Photo by Rowan Moore Gerety for Mongabay.

Despite the challenges of getting involved with advocacy, NGOs have used their influence to bring about some changes to the shrimp trawling industry, albeit with mixed results. In 2003, WWF was behind the successful push for trawlers to install the BRDs, as well as turtle excluder devices, in order to reduce bycatch of sea turtles and other marine life.

Blue Ventures negotiated a deal with the shrimp lobby to ban trawling in a 4,300-square-kilometer (1,660-square-mile) area near the Barren Isles for the entire 2017 season. (Reports vary on whether trawlers respected the closure; they seem to have at least reduced their activity there.) But the shrimp lobby did not agree to maintain this no-trawl zone for the 2018 season, which started March 1.

For the last three years, WWF has partnered with Madagascar's shrimp lobby on a "[fisheries improvement project](#)." The main goal is to enable the shrimp industry to become certified by the Marine Stewardship Council, which would indicate a healthy, sustainable fishery. In the past 15 years, consultants have pre-assessed the lobby for MSC certification three times, but the industry's high bycatch rates raised flags and the lobby has never actually begun the formal certification process. Ratsifandrihamanana said the industry's current leadership is "not dynamic" and has to be pushed along by WWF. Certification remains "a long way off," she added.

WWF and Blue Ventures both have partnerships with Unima, one of the five main trawling firms in Madagascar. The partnerships are focused on the company's aquaculture work, which has a good reputation: its shrimp farm in northwest Madagascar recently became the first in Africa to receive Aquaculture Stewardship Council certification. But Unima's environmental record at sea is not as strong. From 1986 until 2000, the company had exclusive industrial fishing rights to the Diana region in northwest Madagascar, historically the best shrimp fishing grounds in the country. Today, not a single trawler works there: the area is "economically extinct," as some observers have put it. The reasons for this extinction are, again, the subject of debate. In any case, the shrimp are gone, and Unima's trawlers have moved further south.

The NGOs receive no money in exchange for these partnerships. But while the shrimp companies have so far declined to make significant changes to their business model as a result of the partnerships, they have used the NGOs to bolster their public image. Despite never having initiated the MSC certification process, the shrimp lobby has told countless observers the process is underway — and at least one member company, Unima, [makes a similar claim on its website](#). The lobby and some of its member companies advertise partnerships with WWF on their websites, including Unima, which does not make clear that the partnership is only for the aquaculture sector.

Ratsifandrihamanana said that in some cases the companies' language and use of the WWF logo was inappropriate. Blue Ventures declined to comment on its Unima partnership, as it has not been finalized. Unima did not respond to requests for comment.



A shrimp trawler along Madagascar’s west coast raises its gear, displaying heavy “doors” that drag along the seafloor during fishing. The technique is criticized for damaging marine habitat. The sails of traditional fishing pirogues are visible further out to sea. Photo by Garth Cripps.

A voice for fishing communities

The two NGOs are also now helping fishing communities to organize. For the first time, coastal fishers seem ready to meaningfully oppose industrial fishing close to shore. Mihari, a civil society group comprised of some 200 Malagasy community associations, recently called for the government to establish an exclusive zone for local fishers — essentially, a large no-trawl zone along the coast.

“We’re dealing with powerful interests,” Hermany Emoantra, Mihari’s president and a fisherman on Madagascar’s southwest coast, told Mongabay. “We have to protect our human rights. Fishing communities need to work together and come forward with a clear message.”

Blue Ventures has provided funding and administrative support to Mihari, and WWF is one of its partners. Formed in 2012 as a way of facilitating the exchange of ideas among fishers, Mihari has developed into an important advocacy group.

Harris says that Blue Ventures aims to help coastal communities communicate their priorities to the government. “This is clearly far more beneficial to Madagascar than had we acted as a foreign detractor launching a critique of the injustice of the status quo,” he said.

The government has not yet acted on Mihari’s proposal. Meanwhile, fishing communities are waiting to hear whether their call for exclusive access to Madagascar’s inshore waters will be heard



A fishing pirogue at low tide in the town of Beheloke in southwestern Madagascar. Photo by Rowan Moore Gerety for Mongabay.

While industry justifications for reversal of the inshore trawling ban point to the sector's contribution to the economic development of Madagascar, figures of national employment paint a very different picture. Just 1,500 are employed in Madagascar's industrial fishing sector, compared to an estimated 500,000 employees directly and indirectly dependent on traditional fisheries. The volume of shrimp caught by industrial and traditional fisheries each year is roughly equal, (around 3,500 tonnes each in 2012); yet for the latter that volume of catch may support up to 340 times more people.

The reintroduction of destructive bottom trawling adjacent to the Indian Ocean's largest LMMA marks a break with recent years of headway in community-led marine conservation, that have seen over 17% of Madagascar's inshore seabed benefit from some form of local fisheries management.

This setback heralds an unfortunate return to a challenging time for traditional fishers in the region. They must once again compete with industrial fleets for diminishing marine resources, including both shrimp and increasingly finfishes – an accessory catch which is sold on both national and international markets. They must also run the gauntlet of laying their nets in the same waters as trawling vessels, risking the destruction of the fishing gear that families depend on for their survival, and that few can afford to replace.

These events underline the need for improved recognition of the human rights of Madagascar's traditional fishing communities, particularly regarding secure tenure rights to fishing grounds, and the introduction of marine spatial planning to mitigate conflicts between small-scale and industrial fishing sectors. These needs are emphasised in the [recent motions](#) endorsed by the

country's national LMMA network [MIHARI](#) and signed by traditional fishers from across Madagascar's coastal regions, which were received by representatives of the Ministry of Fisheries at the national MIHARI conference in 2017.

Blue Ventures continues to support the MIHARI network to work with government partners to take steps to help safeguard the livelihoods of these communities in the face of growing outside pressures.

Citations

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Popular In the Community