

# Tanzanian coral reefs at risk

The greatest threat to coral reefs along the coast of Tanzania is the use of explosives for fishing. Despite public protests and parliamentary attention, the practice continues and threatens the future of Tanzania's spectacular coral reef formations and inshore fisheries

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Looking out over the sea from a beach in Dar es Salaam, you suddenly see a huge plume of water rise up and flop down. A dull thud follows shortly. A fisherman has just blasted the reef again in

broad daylight. The use of explosives for fishing is illegal and has been the subject of press campaigns, parliamentary debates and public concern for many years. Yet it continues with alarming frequency.

The dynamite-fisherman simply identifies a clump of coral around which fishes are plentiful, he then lights a dynamite charge on a short fuse and tosses it into the water. The blast stuns or kills many of the fish in the vicinity, and these are then scooped up in handnets and taken back to the market for sale. It seems to be a quick and easy method of fishing.

But there are other effects that must also be considered. The explosion smashes the coral: a productive, fertile coral reef is reduced to lifeless rubble resembling a bomb crater. The blast destroys the habitat where the fish live, feed and breed. When the reefs are blasted repeatedly over a long period of time it is hardly surprising that there are fewer and fewer fish to be caught.

The method is inefficient and wasteful even in the short term. Most of the fish affected by the explosion are inedible types, or are too small, or are hidden under coral debris, or swim away half-stunned to die later or are snatched by seagulls (the birds now realise that the sound of an explosion signals a feast).

The coral reefs around Dar es Salaam have been seriously damaged and their productivity is so low that fishermen now move further up and down the Tanzanian coast. The destruction covers a wider area.

The traditional fishermen who have coexisted harmoniously with the sea find that their livelihood is threatened. They are unable to catch sufficient fish from the bombed reefs. The workers and peasants to whom fish was a relatively inexpensive, protein-rich component of their diet

now find that fish become scarce and highly priced.

Why is this illegal, destructive and wasteful method of fishing allowed to continue? Who is deriving benefit from the practice?

Fishermen very often do not own boats and fishing gear. Upon return from a day's fishing, the catch is divided up with a small share for each of the fishermen and a large share going to the boat owner. The owner may control the marketing and may own the means of transport. He may also be instrumental in the acquisition of dynamite and its subsequent distribution. He may have social status as a *mwinyi* or a *sheikh*, or he may be a corrupt individual with some capital and a "get-rich-quick" mentality.

Corruption is a very serious obstacle to solving the problem of dynamiting. Tanzanians must try to combat and expose these tendencies; they must exert pressure on the government to take the problem seriously.

A recent measure to introduce the use of electrical detonators for dynamite may make its use more awkward, but the problem of the conservation of coral reefs must be tackled in a more comprehensive manner. The measures taken to curb dynamiting by peasant fishermen should be coordinated with plans to develop the fishing industry, relying mainly upon the already existing fishing communities with the introduction of new materials, equipment and training.

Historically little attention has been paid to the coastal peasant fishermen in Tanzania. During the colonial era, there was little interest in fish because they were perishable and could not be exported; investment was concentrated on minerals and crops which could be sent to Germany and England. After independence in 1961 the artisan fisheries of the coast continued to be overlooked. The first five-year plan, for 1964-69, gave priority to the expansion of inland fisheries, and to the development of an offshore industrial scale fisheries. The latter was basically restricted to the operation of foreign companies fishing for luxury export products. For example, through a bilateral agreement, prawn fishing was introduced with Japanese boats and equipment and the prawns were exported directly to Japan, without even being landed in Tanzania. There was no involvement and no links to the local economy.

In the more recent 1976/77-80/81 Development Plan, the element of foreign capital has been dropped, but heavy dependence on foreign technology remains. Tanzanian peasant fishermen have no defined role in these plans. In the circumstances, coral reef dynamiting will more than likely persist as the gap between Tanzanian artisan fisheries and industrial fisheries widens. □

