

KENYA'S FISH DIVERSITY: STATUS, THREATS AND POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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Africa is one of the richest continents in terms of natural resources but has remained the poorest due to unsustainable utilization of her natural resources, conflicts and lack of innovation to create wealth such resources. The continent with a population of over 1 billion boasts of enormous plant resources, the richest animal resources including fish and a whole range of no-living resources. In terms of natural fisheries resources, Kenya is subdivided into Lake Victoria, Rift Valley lakes, riverine fishes and the Indian Ocean. The Rift Valley lakes comprise Lakes Turkana, Baringo, Naivasha, Magadi, Elementaita, Bogoria and Nakuru. Although lakes Nakuru, Elementaita, Magadi and Bogoria have no fisheries resources, they are a home to huge populations of wildlife which support a thriving tourism industry. Other small lakes such as Chala and Jipe, rivers and dams also support some fisheries. Besides the above freshwater resources, Kenya also enjoys a vast coastline on the Western Indian Ocean where it shares coastal and oceanic water with Somalia in the north and Tanzania to the south. Associated with the above inland and marine water bodies are fisheries of one form or another, which contribute to the national economy and earn the country foreign exchange. The fisheries sector plays an important role in the economy by providing employment and income to over 1 million people engaged in fish production and related enterprises. Fish is also a rich source of animal protein for human consumption and provides raw materials for the manufacture of animal feeds and other products. These resources are, therefore, of strategic importance not only in the national food policy but also for economic development. Although the fisheries resources of Lake Victoria and some Rift Valley lakes are almost over-exploited, marine fisheries resources are still largely under-exploited especially in the deep ocean waters. Kenya has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) which extends up to 200 nautical miles. The EEZ remains unexploited by artisanal fishermen and continue to be illegally exploited by the Distant Water Fishing Nations (DWFN), an issue that the country needs to address expeditiously. The fisheries resources from the rivers play an important role in providing protein to many local communities. If sustainably managed, the fisheries resources have the potential of alleviating poverty and creating enormous wealth for the people of Kenya. This paper gives an overview of the fish diversity in Kenyan water bodies, challenges facing their conservation and potential for national development. Information was gathered from previous research work, Fisheries Department statistics and the current research in the Rift Valley lakes.

Key words: Fish diversity, conservation, threats, fisheries resources, potential