

Q & As for Maximin Djondo, OceanCare Aquatic Wild Life Conservation Consultant, on Aquatic Wildmeat in West Africa for CMS CoP13

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In parts of West Africa, communities now hunt aquatic animals, some of which are protected. In some cases, this is illegal, but these communities still risk hunting, eating and selling the meat of these animals (“**aquatic wildmeat**”). Why do they take these risks?

Just because they have no choice as they are more and more poor. Of course, this is not an excuse to hunt endangered and protected animals. But what do you do or say to someone who needs to feed their family and to send them to school? When their daily and cultural activity, fishing, is becoming more and more difficult and yields less and less fishes? They have then turned to illegal hunting of aquatic wildmeat species to supplement their income and provide adequate protein for their families. This has become an increasingly important source of income that is relied upon to support the needs of families.

Which animals (mammals, reptiles and amphibians) are being targeted?

The most hunted ones are sea turtles (Chelonioidea), African manatees (Trichechus senegalensis), the sitatunga or swamp-dwelling antelope (Tragelaphus spekii), the dwarf crocodile (Osteolaemus tetraspis), also known as the African dwarf crocodile, West Africa Nile monitors (Varanus stellatus) and water birds

Is this aquatic animal hunting part of the local culture or is it a new phenomenon?

It used to be cultural when the demand arose from the needs of local people. Fat, skin, teeth, tail and scales are used in the composition of herbal teas for traditional medicines, but nowadays it's more and more commercial as the demand comes not only from the community but from the entire region.

What are the drivers behind the new and increasing hunts?

An increasing number of fishermen, the spread of prohibited fishing gear and the drastic reduction of coastal catches, which is likely driven by overharvest from offshore fishing fleets, have led these fishermen to become outlaws, turning to other sources of animal protein—the capture and sale of which is often prohibited by law. These behaviours are illegal. The cultural demand for wildmeat increases the price; creating a commodity desirable for status-seeking consumers. As fishing practices provide fishermen with less income, they increasingly rely on an income from hunting. Aside from rural areas where eating wildmeat is cultural, aquatic wildmeat is in high demand across cities which explains why people in Grand Popo (Benin) and Aneho (Togo) hunt marine turtles: the meat is highly sought in Lomé and Cotonou, and the shells can be sold in markets for use as traditional medicine. And in Benin, for instance, local communities used to trap water birds primarily for subsistence, but in recent decades trapping has become a source of income for many hunters (youths and adults), fuelled by an increase of urban and transborder demand originating mostly from Nigeria

Where in West Africa is this practice most prevalent, and is it unique to West Africa or does this happen elsewhere in the world as well?

It happens mostly along the coast from Nigeria to Mauritania, but also in Central Africa from Cameroon to Angola. Unfortunately, it's not only in Africa, but everywhere in the least developed countries where coastal communities are facing the same issues.

Conventions, agreements and local regulations do exist in some countries. Are they working? If not, why not?



There are a lot of international treaties and conventions calling for global action on aquatic wildmeat, and these are translated into a lot of national and local rules. Unfortunately, in most cases, those in charge of law enforcement are corrupt and don't really care about aquatic wildmeat. Sometimes, if there is some understanding of the situation, the offices or agencies in charge of regulations have no capacity to act on violations, as there is a lack of political will and no strong community involvement.

You are part of a network which tackles the problem on both, the local and the international level. Why do you approach it in these two different ways?

All our efforts in the field to protect and conserve wildlife will only be successful if we tackle the problem at every layer of the chain, from the community level to the international level. So at a local level, we use the strength of our different networks to change policies and practices, and we use international NGO and UN agencies to lobby for better common actions to protect natural resources. For example, most of the vessels causing fish stock depletion within West Africa's coastal areas are from countries outside Africa. So we need not only to lobby in Africa for a better control of fishing permit issuing, but we need also to lobby for the involvement of international agencies to help control the traffic at an international level. Furthermore, African countries need financial and technical support to face the problems of poverty, habitat degradation, human population growth and overexploitation of natural resources.

You closely work with OceanCare. What is the value of this partnership and what has been achieved so far?

The overall objective of BEES's work is to address priority threats to biodiversity and support the long-term conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in Benin's southern wetlands. As you know, OceanCare works at the national and international level in the areas of marine pollution, environmental changes, fisheries, whaling, sealing, captivity of marine mammals and public education – which is in line with BEES's mission. Working with OceanCare gave me the unique opportunity to be where I, representing my region's voices, needed to be and to take part in international debates dealing with issues in my region and in the world. It's obvious that the involvement of community members in project design and achievements is one of the keys to biodiversity conservation. Our organization therefore works with OceanCare to build the capacities of stakeholders and make them the actors of the desired changes. With the help of OceanCare, we are now fully involved in the work of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS), the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and the Abidjan Convention.

What are the main challenges you have in addressing aquatic wildmeat harvests in West Africa?
It's important to take into account that the income from aquatic wildmeat contributes to the food security of rural families, allowing them to purchase other crucial food supplements and to save money for their households. We then need not only to ask for better law enforcement, but also to work with communities and define, together with them, strategies to protect wild fauna and at the same time provide them with what they need to survive. Sometimes it's just frustrating to see that our governments are not putting enough effort into protecting wild fauna as this is not yet their priority.

What are the next steps for your work in this area?

The Abidjan Convention and the CMS agreed that there is an urgent need for a large scale assessment of aquatic wildlife species on sale in markets, the collection of data about the origins of the meat and of reasons for the harvest. So we will continue to work on the ground to understand the scale and scope of the problem and its underlying causes, and at the same time we will continue building the capacities of CSO and national governments to take the most appropriate actions for tackling the issue.



You were born and raised in Benin, West Africa, but you work all over the world. Do you think that people in different regions see this issue the same way, or it is interpreted differently in, say, Europe than it is in West Africa?

For sure that the problem is totally differently perceived in different regions. People in Europe are protected by EU and national regulations, and they have different feelings about aquatic wildmeat if it happens that they get a bycatch. Mostly, they then just throw the animal away dead, because this is not part of their diet or any kind of cultural activity. But for African people, this meat is everything. For African communities, it's about survival. How can Europeans understand that for African people, many species caught as aquatic wildmeat hold a high value in the traditional medicine pharmacopoeia and has been widely used? For some African community members, poaching is the only means to get some ridiculously little amount of money for their daily needs.

Along with being Director of BEES, Maximin is the National Coordinator for ProEnvironment, the Benin national platform for NGOs working towards environmental conservation and biodiversity protection. He spent the past 15 years promoting economic viability, social equity, and environmental health in the West Africa region with a particular focus on aquatic ecosystems. He also has expertise on ecosystem services valuation and natural resources management. As BEES's director, he conducts and promotes research and provides policy support on issues related to forests and aquatic ecosystems. He also builds capacity, raises awareness, strengthens networks and promotes good governance to protect critical ecosystems and vulnerable people. BEES is an IUCN member, WWN member, observer for the Green Climate Funds and has a special consultative status with ECOSOC, the Economic and Social Council of the UN.

In 2019, Maximin joined OceanCare as Aquatic Wild Life Conservation Consultant for Western Africa.