

# Lake Ties

**Fisherfolk use their social networks to navigate formal and informal rules in accessing the fisheries of Lake Victoria**

**A**ccess to the fisheries of Lake Victoria in East Africa is often described as 'open', meaning that anyone can join the fisheries, but in both policy and practice, there are a number of formal measures and informal rules that have to be navigated to work and trade in the fisheries. Fisherfolk make use of their social networks to help them through this myriad of formal and informal rules and processes.

Lake Victoria is the second largest freshwater body in the world, supporting the livelihoods of millions of people in the three countries bordering the Lake (Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) through income, food

919,310 tonnes, valued at US\$840 mn at the beach level. However, there has been much concern about declining stocks and catches of Nile perch since the early 2000s, attributed to high fishing pressure, the prevalence of illegal fishing and ecosystem degradation.

This concern has led to the adoption of measures to manage, and potentially limit, access. However, access is not yet limited though there are many formal and informal systems and rules that mediate access to the fisheries, and these are set out here as including the co-management system, boat licensing and social and economic ties between fisherfolk. The article also reflects on how movement between landing sites affects access, and how women negotiate access to fish, before identifying cage farming and efforts to manage capacity as activities that may affect fishers' access to the Lake.

**However, the installation of cages is controversial, with fishers concerned that their access to the Lake is being taken away from them as shorelines are closed off.**

and water. There are three main commercial fisheries: Nile perch, most of which is processed and exported through processing plants; Nile tilapia, serving mainly the domestic and regional markets; and, *dagaa*, a small sardine-like fish which is widely used in the region and exported to other African countries for both human and animal consumption.

The Lake is managed by the national fisheries departments which co-ordinate their plans and measures through the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization, which is a structure of the regional intergovernmental organization, the East African Community (EAC). The latest Fisheries Management Plan for the Lake reports an estimated total catch in 2014 of

## Co-management and access

A system of co-management was introduced in the three countries from the late 1990s, initially supported on Lake Victoria by the World Bank-funded Lake Victoria Environmental Management Programme. The introduction of co-management primarily involved the formation of community-based Beach Management Units (BMUs). Guidelines and legislation require a BMU to be formed at all landing sites with at least 30 boats; those with fewer boats join with other sites to form a BMU. Everyone working within fisheries at a landing site is required to be a member of a BMU. Accessing the fisheries, therefore, requires fisherfolk to be a member of a BMU, and a register of members should be kept by each BMU.

This article is by **Fiona Nunan** ([f.s.nunan@bham.ac.uk](mailto:f.s.nunan@bham.ac.uk)), Senior Lecturer, International Development Department, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom

Access to the fisheries is formally through applying for a licence to operate. Licences are required to take a boat out to fish, and to use a boat to collect and transport fish. Licences are also required to process, trade and transport fish on land. Responsibility for issuing licences rests with the government. In Kenya, the State Department for Fisheries is responsible for issuing licences, which it does through the County Fisheries Officer. Central government is also responsible for licensing in Uganda, with the fees kept by the Department of Fisheries Resources for the sector. A register of everyone issued with a licence should be maintained and a certificate issued, together with a fishing vessel identification plate. In Tanzania, boat licences are issued by local government for vessels below 11 m in length. Various restrictions apply with regard to boat licences, such as keeping within fishing regulations, and licences cannot be transferred.

There is no limit to the number of licences that can be issued and so licences are seen as a way of raising revenue from the fisheries. However, although licensing is supposed to take place on an annual basis, there have, at times, been considerable delays in issuing licences in Uganda and uncertainty in Kenya since the introduction of the county government system following the 2010 Constitution over which level of government should have the responsibility for issuing licences. The cost of a licence is not prohibitive, and fishers are more likely to be arrested and sanctioned for fishing illegally as are traders/processors dealing in undersized fish than fishing or trading without a licence. They can, however, be sanctioned for not having a licence and a bribe may be offered or sought in lieu of a sanction.

The 2016-2020 Fisheries Management Plan for Lake Victoria sets out a number of measures to be developed to improve the licensing system and to work towards controlling access. These are: the development of harmonized fishing craft registration and licence registers;

introduction of Species Specific Licensing for Nile perch; and, the development and piloting of regional guidelines for a user rights-based management system. It is then possible that the system of accessing the Lake fisheries will change over the coming years.

Access to the fisheries is not solely down to paying for a licence. For boat owners, access requires the purchase of a boat and gears, which often relies on access to credit. This credit is generally provided by fish agents, who buy fish on behalf of the fish-processing factories and provide credit to boat owners in exchange for a reliable and long-term supply of Nile perch. For boat crew, access to the fisheries is made possible through employment by boat owners. Employment relies upon good relations with the boatowner, as the owner must trust the crew with their boat and gears and to return with all of the catch. Boat crew also rely on friends for recommendations to boat owners, particularly when moving to a different landing site.

### Access and migration

Around half of the boat crew are believed to move between landing sites, in search of higher catches and prices. Boat crew do not always move with a boat but seek work with a different boatowner on arrival at a

FIONA NUNAN



Sorting a catch of Nile perch. The credit is generally provided by fish agents, who provide credit to boatowners in exchange for a reliable and long-term supply of Nile perch

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Boats parked up on island landing site. Employment relies upon good relations with the boatowner, as the owner must trust the crew with their boat and gears

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landing site. Migrants are expected to carry with them a letter from the leader of the BMU at the landing site they have left, which they present to the leader of the BMU at the new landing site. Such a letter should confirm their identity and good character. Access to employment as fishers move around the Lake also depends on social networks, with boat crew relying on contacts in accessing information on fish catches and prices and in making new connections for employment and housing.

### Lake Victoria fisherwomen

Women make up around a quarter of the people working in fisheries at the beach level, with the majority of women engaged in processing and trading fish, particularly tilapia, *dagaa* and undersized Nile perch. Access to fish relies on establishing good relationships with boat crew and boat owners. This may result from marriage, with women fish processors and traders buying fish from their husbands. Alternatively, credit or gifts, such as cigarettes, may be provided to crew to persuade them to sell their fish to those providing the gifts. The practice of 'fish for sex' is also found on Lake Victoria, where sex is exchanged for access to fish. This practice has been associated with high levels of HIV/AIDS around the

Lake, as well as with alcohol use and boat crew migration.

Two key challenges may affect access to the fisheries of Lake Victoria in the coming years. These are the introduction of cage farming on the Lake, and plans to manage fishing capacity. In terms of cage farming, allowing private investors to establish cages in the Lake is in line with the increasing attention given to aquaculture in the region, and seeing the adoption of aquaculture as a solution to declining catches in capture fisheries. However, the installation of cages is controversial, with fishers concerned that their access to the Lake is being taken away from them as shorelines are closed off. The Regional Plan of Action for the Management of Fishing Capacity on Lake Victoria (RPOA-Capacity), agreed in 2007, aims to introduce a number of measures to manage and—in the case of Nile perch—control, fishing capacity. Some of those measures can be found in the latest Fisheries Management Plan, but measures to control or limit fishing capacity remain contested, given the lack of alternative livelihood sources in the region. ¶

#### For more



<http://www.fao.org/nr/tenure/land-tenure-journal/index.php/LTJ/article/viewArticle/74>

#### **Governance of tenure in the Lake Victoria fisheries, Tanzania**

<http://www.fao.org/3/a-bl763e.pdf>  
**Nile Perch Fishery Management Plan 2015-2019**

<http://securefisheries.org/blog/future-lake-victoria-part-1>

#### **The future of Lake Victoria: A looming conflict over fisheries**

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08941920.2017.1383547>

#### **Community Cohesion: Social and Economic Ties in the Personal Networks of Fisherfolk**