



# A Multi-Agency Task Team Working together to end destructive blast fishing

## Background

Blast fishing, also known as dynamite fishing, is a highly destructive, illegal method of catching fish which uses dynamite or other types of explosives to send shock-waves through the water, stunning or killing fish which are then collected and sold. Blast fishing can be lucrative: both from the sale of the fish caught and also from the trade of illegal explosives. Improvised explosive devices may explode prematurely and have been known to injure or kill the person using them, or innocent bystanders.

Blast fishing was first recorded in Africa in the early 1960s and while it has been brought under control in neighbouring countries it remains a huge problem in Tanzania. Blast fishing occurs along the entire Tanzanian coastline and often takes place within the coral reefs, biodiversity hotspots that provide local communities with food and attract international tourism. The blasts shatter the coral, destroying the habitat which results in drastic reduction in catches, affecting food security. It also causes beach erosion as the reefs no longer provide protection from the sea. Coral reefs have failed to recover, even those blasted 40 years ago.

Over the past 20 years several aid programmes provided funding for increased marine patrols, and with the help of the Navy blast fishing was almost eradicated - the withdrawal of the Navy in 2004, and the winding down of the donor support in 2005 blast fishing resumed once more. Although Tanzania has enacted laws and regulations against blast fishing, the current legal framework is outdated, there is weak enforcement and few successful prosecutions, hence no deterrent.

## The story

Many factors contribute to the prevalence of blast fishing in Tanzania; the low cost and easy accessibility of explosives from the mining sector, road construction projects and cement factories; the relatively easy methods of making home-made explosives using simple ingredients such as a plastic bottle filled with chemical fertilizers and diesel; the low and ineffective rate of enforcement and prosecutions; environmental stresses resulting in reduced catches by traditional fishing methods; and the high levels of poverty and unemployment.

Law enforcement is severely hampered by corruption of some officials who tip off blast fishers about patrols, and intimidation of officials and the local community who fear the consequences of informing on blast fishers<sup>1</sup>.

The Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) SmartFish Programme has worked with the Tanzania Ministry of Livestock and Fishery Development (MLFD) since 2011, conducting multiple operations aimed at attacking the widespread problem of blast fishing, and backing this up with intensive training sessions to improve the effectiveness of monitoring control and surveillance (MCS) June 2012 saw the start of a series of investigation and prosecution training sessions led by two

<sup>1</sup> NGO Sea Sense cites an example of a patrol officer who lost his eye and suffered other facial injuries after acid was thrown at him. A 'small MATT' operation planned for the Dar es Salaam Ferry Fish Market to seize vessels used in blast fishing activities had to be abandoned when the MCS patrol teams were attacked and a riot ensued

SmartFish experts with experience in fisheries enforcement and the prosecution of fisheries crimes. Theory sessions were followed by a simulated inspection of a fishing vessel to allow the participants to put in to practice what they had learnt. This was followed shortly afterwards by Operation Dragnet, a series of five law enforcement operations coordinated by the SmartFish experts which took place both on land and at sea over two weeks, directed at blast fishing hotspots in the Tanga Region. MCS personnel, marine police officers, police detectives and members of Beach Management Units (BMUs) took part – a multi-agency operation which was the first of many to come.

A similar training exercise held in August 2012, resulted in the arrest of suspected blast fishers and indications of who was supplying the explosives. It was becoming clear that the blast fishing network was extremely complex, involving a huge number of illegal fishers, explosives traders, government officials and intimidation of the community and that the current MCS approach, focusing on the village traders and makers of home-made explosives and the blast fishermen would not combat the problem. A bolder, more far-reaching approach was needed to tackle the dealers of industrial explosives involved at the top of this lucrative illegal trade. The MCS process also lacked an informer network to supply information, it had no database to record information and little information sharing between agencies. There was also a lack of usable equipment, poor organisation and planning processes and corruption of officials resulting in tip-offs. MCS was vastly underfunded and was financially dependent on foreign aid.

It was decided that the best way to tackle the problem was to form a multi-agency task team (MATT) to facilitate resource and information sharing and bring together the expertise needed to tackle blast fishing. In September 2014 a small pilot team was formed, to put together the resources required to gather intelligence and investigate the threat. The team consisted of members of the Criminal Intelligence Unit of the Tanzanian Police Force and the Tanzanian Intelligence Security Service (TISS), MCS officers from MLFD and the SmartFish experts.

The information uncovered by this ‘pilot MATT’ was of such alarming proportions that the team was strengthened by bringing in additional agencies to form a MATT capable of carrying out investigations and operations on land and at sea. Workshops were held in December 2014 and January 2015 to facilitate this, inviting stakeholders and senior representatives from relevant ministries. As a result an enhanced MATT was inaugurated in June 2015, led by the Ministry of Home Affairs and including TISS, MLFD, Ministry of Energy and Minerals, Ministry of Natural Resources and the Tanzanian Police Force. MATT’s remit was broadened to include all environmental crimes, including wildlife crimes such as ivory poaching, trade in illegal timber, illegal mining and all fisheries-related crimes. The team would jointly deal with the higher levels of organised crime syndicates, while the individual ministries would deal with the more agency-specific tasks like MCS patrols, ranger patrols, etc.

While the formalities of setting up the enhanced MATT were taking place, the pilot MATT continued to operate. In December 2014 and January 2015 operational training missions were conducted, assisted by other stakeholders, in the Tanga, Dar es Salaam and Arusha regions and significant successes were achieved. SmartFish, over two years helped the government to confiscate 300 kg of explosives, impound 50 fishing vessels and prosecute five cases of illegal fishing.

Concurrent to these activities, SmartFish supported a local NGO, Sea Sense, to continue their grass roots campaign of education on the harmful effects of blast fishing and how to collect and provide information and to whom to provide such information.

## Drivers

The main driver was the urgent need to stop the devastation of Tanzania’s coral reefs and fisheries resources and the knock-on effects this devastation has; the loss of biodiversity and subsequent coastal erosion, implications for food security, livelihoods and employment opportunities, and effects on the tourism industry. In addition the easy accessibility of explosives is seen as a threat to national security.

## Results

Following the implementation of MATT a range of actions took place, resulting in major successes:

- Two MATT projects have been set up; a Fisheries Crime Project ‘Blast fishing’ and a Wildlife Crime Project ‘Ivory Smuggling’.
- Within four months of the inauguration of MATT the ‘Blast fishing’ project had uncovered sources of explosives linked to businesses and high-profile individuals, developed a reliable informer network at the highest levels of involvement, set up an information database, uncovered the modus operandi of the smugglers, identified international smuggling routes and made arrests in an undercover sting operation.
- In February 2015 a major operation and the first of its kind in Tanzania, seized vessels and scuba equipment used for blast fishing and illegally caught fish at the Ferry Fish Market in Dar es Salaam and the neighbouring Kigambone landing site.
- In February 2015 Sea Sense trained thousands of fish traders in Dar es Salaam, Coast and Tanga regions in how to identify fish caught by blast fishing. Traders benefit from rejecting fish caught in this way as it deteriorates quickly, resulting in large financial losses.

## Lessons learned

- Cooperation between government agencies is key in tackling complex organised crime.
- Robust laws are required to enable a real deterrent.
- Focusing law enforcement activities on higher levels of organised crime syndicates and not just the illegal fishers is essential.
- Considering other beneficiaries of crime beyond the sale of catch, in this case the trade of illegal explosives.
- Further training is required along the entire law enforcement chain; lack of successful prosecution results from mistakes being made not only during operations and follow-up investigations but also from a lack of knowledge concerning blast fishing legislation on the part of magistrates.
- Effective law enforcement should go hand in hand with community awareness campaigns to tackle the problem from the grass roots and build community support.
- Community approaches such as that of Mkubiru village, should be encouraged: Mkubiru village, in Mnazi Bay Ruvuma Estuary Marine Park, has reduced blast fishing in nearby waters to almost zero. Volunteers patrol local waters, the village punishes offenders and compensates local fishers for any loss or damages incurred when dynamiters take revenge.

## Challenges

- The scale of the problem: blast fishing is part of a complex web of illegal activities carried out by organised crime syndicates involved in illegal drug trafficking, prostitution and human trafficking, gun running, and wildlife and timber smuggling, often linked to businesses and high-profile individuals.



- Poverty, declining catch rates and unemployment drive villagers towards blast fishing: the challenge is to develop alternative livelihoods such as ecotourism, seaweed farming and other private sector investments to grow the local economy.
- Intimidation is a major problem with instances of violence towards those found to have reported them, both villagers and officials, frightening others from reporting cases to the authorities<sup>3</sup>. The lack of successful prosecutions further discourages people from reporting perpetrators.
- The ease at which explosives can be acquired is a major problem and has implications for national security.
- Extensive hard-to-patrol coastlines and a lack of equipment make enforcement of blast fishing laws an ongoing challenge for the authorities.

## Policy implications

- National multi-agency cooperation and information sharing is vital to ensure that violations and crimes in the fishery and natural resource sector are stopped and perpetrators brought to justice.
- Robust fisheries laws should not only focus on the illegal fishers but should deal with the whole chain of perpetrators: the people who finance the operations, provide the explosives and other equipment such as boats and scuba gear and the people who market the fish.
- Strengthening political support by all agencies to the MATT and to support the MATTs cooperation with regional and international bodies.
- The Government of Tanzania in collaboration with IOC-SmartFish and other initiatives are making a real and lasting impact in supporting countries to fight against illegal activities in the fishery sector – they must be supported to continue to do so.

## Recommendations

- Increasing the involvement and cooperation of the community in fighting blast fishing through an awareness campaign on the environmental and economic impacts of blast fishing, support and reactivation of BMUs, the development of local resource ‘ownership’, and promotion of alternative employment opportunities is important.
- Mainland Tanzania and Zanzibar each have their own specific pieces of legislation that regulate the fisheries sector. Differences in the formulation of offences pertinent to blast fishing should be harmonised.
- The different penalty provisions between Acts for what is essentially the same offence are problematic; the Marine Parks and Reserves Act of 1994, for example, has a very low penalty for being in possession of explosives compared to the other Acts.
- The Explosive Act of 1963 and the Explosive Regulations of 1964 are outdated with penalties which no longer serve as a deterrent. The Ministry of Minerals and Energy need to replace or amend the Act.
- To secure resources to support further training operations and equipment for the MATT.

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