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**Well Managed Fisheries Vital for Environmentally Friendly Development in
Poor Parts of the Globe**

***Studies from Mauritania, Argentina and Senegal Point to Pitfalls and Possible
Solutions for Balancing Trade and Environment Concerns***

Geneva/Nairobi, 15 March 2002 - Catches of some key fish stocks have been falling sharply off the west coast of Africa with the decline being linked to over-fishing by foreign fleets.

A preliminary study of Mauritania, where European Union, Japanese and Chinese boats have been given access to fishing grounds, has found that catches of octopus have halved in the past four years and that some species, such as sawfish, have completely disappeared.

Details of the report will be released today at a fisheries workshop in Geneva organised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) where delegates will be discussing the links between international trade and subsidies, and their social and environmental impacts.

The meeting will also review a second preliminary report on fisheries in Bangladesh, which indicates that marine stocks there can support more fishing. Fish stocks in Bangladesh's waters could generate employment and millions of dollars of foreign exchange earnings for one of the world's poorest countries. But the findings from Mauritania, alongside other UNEP-commissioned country studies of Senegal and Argentina, show that strict safeguards must be in place before fishing activities are increased, or foreign fleets are invited in.

Otherwise Bangladesh could find that its stocks too become vulnerable to over-exploitation, inflicting economic costs and putting at risk much needed food supplies for its own people, rather than generating income.

The UNEP fisheries workshop is being attended by some 100 delegates from countries around the world and bodies including the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nation's Food

and Agricultural Organization, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development and the World Wide Fund for Nature. The workshop comes at the start of a new round of world trade talks, which will include negotiations on reducing fisheries subsidies.

The environmental effects of trade are also now firmly on the agenda following decisions made at the WTO Ministerial Conference that took place in Doha last November.

Hussein Abaza, Head of UNEP's Economic and Trade Branch, said: " We are slowly amassing a wealth of hard facts about the complex relationship between trade liberalization, subsidies and their environmental and social impacts, especially in the area of fisheries. It is becoming clear that developing countries stand to gain a great deal from trade in fisheries products, but only if trade and fisheries policies are reformed to support sustainable management of these resources. The country studies we have commissioned, including this new one from Mauritania, not only shed important light on the damage that can be caused by unregulated trade liberalization, but offer pointers to the actions needed so that trade in fish contributes to development and sustains marine ecosystems".

Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP, said:" Fisheries represent, to many developing countries like Bangladesh, a real opportunity for economic development. The fish stocks in many developed country waters have been severely depleted as too many, often heavily subsidised, fleets chase too few fish. As a result they are looking elsewhere for catches. It is vital that the unsustainable fishing of the past and the present is not exported to the developing world".

"The new round of WTO talks, offer a golden opportunity to marry trade liberalization with poverty reduction and environmental safeguards. I believe UNEP's work, comparing and contrasting the differing fortunes of poorer nations in this difficult area, can inform the trade talks and lead to a successful and more sustainable outcome, " he added.

Mauritania

The case of Mauritania highlights the difficulties facing developing countries who, in the push to generate much needed foreign exchange earnings to help fight poverty and assist in economic development, license foreign fleets to use their fishing grounds.

Fishing vessels from the European Union, Japan and China have, for nearly two decades had increasing access to Mauritanian waters fishing grounds where the target species include octopus and shrimp. There are now an estimated 251 industrial, factory-style, foreign vessels operating there.

The preliminary country report, compiled for UNEP by the National Oceanographic and Fisheries Research Centre in Nouadhibou, shows that giving this access has had significant impacts on the marine environment.

Over-fishing due to a failure by some fishing boats to comply with the rules, lack of enforcement and a shortage of fisheries protection boats alongside other factors, have led to a dramatic fall in catches as fish stocks are over-exploited.

For example catches of octopus have fallen by more than 50 per cent in the past four years.

Local employment in the fishing sector has also been hit as a result of the over-fishing and over capacity in the foreign fleets. The number of people employed in the traditional octopus fishery in Mauritania has fallen from a peak of nearly 5,000 in 1996 to around 1,800 now.

Current regulations are allowing the EU shrimp boats to use a smaller mesh size of 50mm for their nets when compared with the native Mauritanian boats, the preliminary report says.

This, the report argues, is leading to the accidental capture of other marine species. This by-catch, which may have important impacts on the marine environment and the supply of traditional fish to local markets, can amount to as much as 58 per cent of the catch of the EU boats.

Other, unforeseen, impacts on local livelihoods and the national economy have been occurring. In 1998 Japan cancelled orders from Mauritania for octopus choosing to buy, from Spain, cheaper catches landed in Europe from Mauritanian waters.

The report concludes that Mauritania has made far less out of granting foreign boats access to its waters than had previously been supposed.

" In granting European..... boats the right to fish in Mauritania, the Government is using economic arguments that take into account only what return that may bring the country, and not what is might cost," it says.

Mr Toepfer said: "We hope that, by bringing to the attention of delegates the experiences of Mauritania, Senegal and Argentina, we can assist developing nations like Bangladesh in formulating policies that permit a sustainable development of their marine fisheries ".

Next week, March 19 to 20, UNEP will be holding a second workshop just days before the WTO negotiations on trade and environment on March 22.

Mr Abaza added: "This capacity building workshop, to which we are bringing delegates from developing countries across the world, will help these nations develop the combination of trade, environment and development policies needed to maximise the benefits of trade. We hope the new round of WTO talks will eventually deliver a legally binding agreement that increases developing countries trading opportunities, respects the environment and helps deliver sustainable development to all the peoples of the world," he said.

Notes to Editors : The fisheries subsidies workshop will take place March 15 in the Palais des Nations in Geneva. Details of the country reports (including Argentina and Senegal as well as preliminary reports on Mauritania and Bangladesh), the agenda of the meeting and background papers can be found at http://www.unep.ch/etu/etp/events/upcming/15March_fisheries.htm.

A press release on the Argentina and Senegal studies, dated 27 December 2001, can be seen at the UNEP main web site address www.unep.org or www.unep.org/Documents/Default.asp?DocumentID=227&ArticleID=2991

The workshop, Capacity Building on Environment, Trade and Development, will take place at the same venue on March 19 to 20.

The Committee on Trade and the Environment of the WTO will start formal negotiations on trade and the environment, in Geneva on March 22.

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