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NIGERIA FISHES FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

by Kobina Danson

The traditional Nigerian fishermen of a few years back cast their nets from dugout canoes, and even paddled out to brave the rollers of the Atlantic Ocean. Fishing was more an art than a science, and its scope was limited to supplying the fish required by the fishermen, their families, and their neighbours.

But under a government-sponsored crash programme to increase the country's fish production, fishing is taking on a new look. Thanks to advanced science and technology many fishermen are becoming fish farmers in Nigeria.

Spearheading the programme are the Federal Institute of Oceanography and Marine Research, and the Research Institutes of Kanji Dam and Lake Chad. Their combined research efforts recently paid off when they successfully induced a local freshwater fish called abori (scientifically known as Clarias lazea) to breed artificially.

The technique involves injecting the fish with a hormone extract from fish belonging to the same species. Five thousand tiny fish fry were produced as a result of the experiment, which gave a boost to the Federal Ministry of Agriculture's fish seed multiplication programme.

Under the programme it is planned to eventually establish fish seed multiplication centres in all 19 states. Two such centres - at Tiga

in Kano State and Maska in Kaduna State - are already operating. Once a reliable supply of fish seed is available more Nigerians will be attracted into fish farming. This should do much to increase the supply of fish for domestic consumption.

But fish farming alone cannot meet the nation's needs, so as part of the accelerated fish production programme the Ministry is also helping to modernize the fishing industry. Large numbers of modern canoes, equipped with outboard motors and nylon nets, are being distributed through the state governments, and the fishermen are being taught how to use and maintain them. Landing bases, stores, and fuel depots are also being established.

Lack of processing and storage facilities had posed a major constraint to the fishing industry in the past. But no more. Improved smoking kilns are under construction at strategic fishing locations for local processing. The Federal Government has also embarked on a programme to build 123 cold stores throughout the country, which will be serviced by a fleet of refrigerated vans.

The reason for the crash programme is that Nigeria faces a serious shortage of fish. Consumption of fish has shot up in recent years, and several hundred thousand tonnes have had to be imported in efforts to keep up with demand. Fish now accounts for about one-third of the nation's animal protein consumption.

The phenomenal rise in fish consumption is the end result of sharp increases in the price of beef and poultry since the Sahelian drought of the seventies. The drought killed many livestock in northern Nigeria, the region that supplies the bulk of the country's animal protein.

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Nigeria has about 800 kilometres of coastline, many rivers, lakes and lagoons, and also plans to utilize the vast freshwater reservoirs and canal systems created by irrigation dams. At present the main impact of the accelerated fish production programme is being felt in nine of the 19 states. As the programme spreads, the people behind it have no doubts that the combination of fish farming and modernized capture fisheries will make Nigeria self-sufficient in fish in the near future.

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