

# Impact of the aquarium industry on the coastal residents of Kenya

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*Kikambala is a small town in Kilifi County located in the coastal regions of Kenya. A decade ago residents were unfamiliar with the potential of the ocean reserves and how to make a sustainable livelihood through it. It was the same story of cries and plight aimed at the national government for resources and employment. The only alternative to earning a decent living, aside from waiting for the government to extend a lending hand, was over-reliance on tourism.*

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF  
KENYA MARINE CENTER



The KMC facility



KMC's women empowerment program involves them alongside their male colleagues during the packing process.

Food fish were readily available and, to most, they represented the only viable source of income from the ocean reserves that Kikambala residents could depend on. But not everyone could do this, and not everyone could supply fish. As a result, and in response to the urgency to look for more income, most residents would migrate to Mombasa city in search of casual jobs at the international port.

## How it is now

But that was then. This is now. The emergence of export companies for live fish and invertebrates to the worldwide aquarium industry in Kenya began in the early 1970s and, to date, there are only a few exporters in the country. The trade is still quite green and considered a tricky business, as most investors fear the hard work, plus the business risks associated with it. Furthermore, the startup capital, along with the regulations to establish and successfully run an aquarium in Kenya are quite taxing.

A deeper knowledge of the European and western market is also a de-stabilizing factor and few dare to venture into this industry that literally takes place in deep waters. Yet, as Jochem Federscmied, CEO of Kenya Marine Center says: "It only takes initiative and a commitment to see things through for any effort to achieve success."

Now, fast forward 10 years to 2016. The state of the coastal regions occupied by aquarium fish export companies has improved with the emergence of industries rising by the day. There is a direct and mutual benefit-based relationship of over 200 people per export company. Take the case of Kenya Marine Center, which has 60 (administration, packing, maintenance, drivers and company fishermen) employees on a permanent basis earning salaries per month, with the rest operating as casual employees. The number rises each year as the aquarium trade is still growing in Kenya.

If you understand the dynamics of exporting live fish you will understand the tedious process that is involved in all the stages before a trader in Europe, United States of America and even Asia receives a successful shipment from Africa. I take this initiative to show you the levels in which export companies have positively engaged coastal region residents of Kenya.

## Employment

There are limited opportunities in terms of employment in the coastal regions of Kenya besides fishing. Before the aquarium industry made its mark in Kenya, most fishing was done for subsistence use only, with a few individuals lucky enough to be employed in export companies who trade in fish for food. As a result, the poverty levels were always on the high side.





*Fishermen setting off to collect at Kikambala beach*

But today, residents have a stable source of income and limitless job opportunities, all thanks to emerging export companies of live fish and invertebrates. To date there are 200 registered fishermen in Kenya working in the aquarium industry. This is according to statistics from Kenya Marine fisheries Research Institute (KMFRI 2014).

*Hand collecting under way*



The ocean reserve has become more than just a food source. Its earning potential has been realized and families have become engaged in different capacities: as packers, maintenance personnel, drivers, and both shallow water and deep sea scuba divers.

It is a known fact that third world countries (like Kenya) need to empower women through gainful employment. In this connection, most women living along the coastal regions now earn their pay through the packing of live fish, and the educated ones hold administration positions.

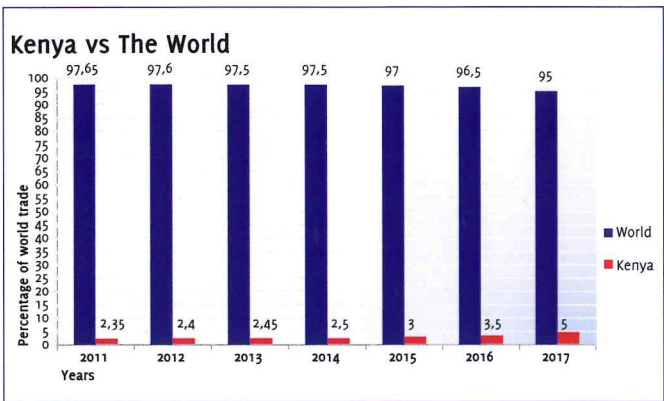
#### **Industrialization**

The demand for locally produced packing materials has also paved the way for local investors to profit from the lucrative aquarium business. Customized materials like Styrofoam, carton fish boxes, rubber bands, sealing tapes and medicinal oxygen have all become locally available. It is worth noting that these industries also provide employment opportunities to locals who now have more options to earn a decent living.

The aquarium industry in Kenya accounts for only 2.5 % of the global market share (USD 8,750,000) per annum. A report from the *Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries 2014* shows that there has been a steady increase of 0.05% (USD 173,956) in the last three years.

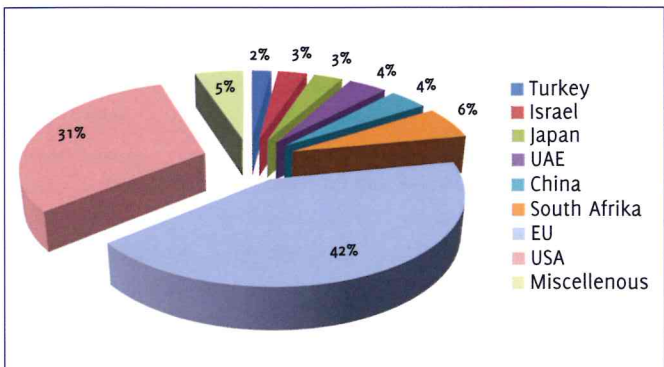


In Kenya, annual aquarium-related meetings by stakeholders, i.e. Kenya government, export promotion council, beach management unit (BMU) and private export companies aim to improve the market percentage to at least 0.5% annually.

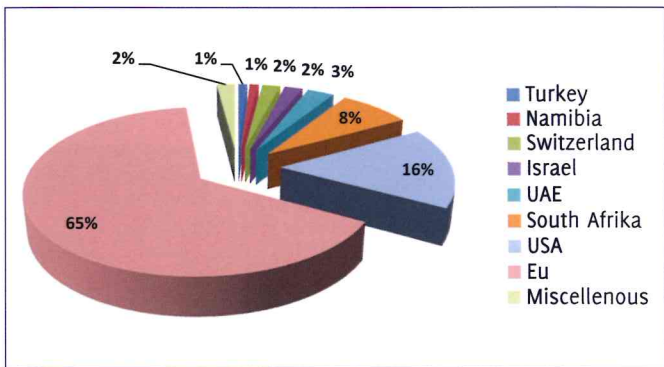


Markets

The main markets for Kenyan marine aquarium fishery products are the EU, USA, South Africa, China, Japan, Israel, Turkey and United Arab Emirates (see pie charts).



Markets for marine aquarium fin fish exports (2014)



Markets for marine aquarium invertebrate exports (2014)

Education

Prior to the establishment of aquarium fish export companies along the Kenyan coast, little information was known about the variety of fish species and invertebrates that could be traded. Residents had little interest in fish that were not harvested for food, and specialization was not necessary as far as fishing was



Houses in the coastal village of Makuti

concerned. Now, through Beach Management Units (BMUs), and the national government (Kenya Marine Fisheries Research Institute, KMFRI), in collaboration with export companies, numerous sensitization programs have been established to create awareness of sustainable fishing practices aimed at protecting the coral reefs.

Existing export companies have also provided university students from all over Kenya with access to information through internships. Students who undertake marine biology courses are, thus, able to conduct research and learn more about marine life and marine species. This platform has enabled many students to gain the knowledge that is necessary to complete their Bachelor's Degree projects or Master's Thesis.

The future seems to be promising. The government has continuously been gaining in interest and is now motivated to put more effort into increasing annual revenues through the aquarium industry. Consultations and negotiations are ongoing to improve this sector of trade under the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries.

Such talks will lead to a strengthened aquarium industry and this is good news for both exporters and coastal residents. It is therefore important for the government and private companies to work together to improve the living standards of the population. ■

FURTHER READING

Annual Report: Kenya Marine Fisheries and Research Institute Statistics 2014 (KMFRI)

Kenya Marine Center Archives (Compiled sales reports maintained by KMC)