

VISSERIJnieuws

Special Christmas and New Year's Issue 2009

Falling down and picking yourself up and the way up

DORDRECHT – By falling down and picking himself up. That is how Dutchman Michel Huijser set up his fish export business in The Gambia. His Atlantic Seafood Company (Gambia) Ltd. now exports deep-frozen sole, cuttlefish and prawns to the European Union. “Only few fishermen fish as sustainably as the fishermen from The Gambia.”

The Gambia is a departure point for many African boat refugees hoping for a future in the rich West. But The Gambia is also a country with a breathtakingly beautiful countryside, and a country in development, brimming over with activity. Michel Huijser (40), who grew up in Rotterdam, had his first encounter with the country when his father became honorary consul in The Gambia. The Netherlands has a worldwide network of honorary consuls, constituting a practically and economically indispensable complement and support to the network of embassies and consulates general. The (unpaid) position of representative of the Kingdom of The Netherlands in The Gambia entailed a Gambian passport for the family and regular visits to the West African country.

The Huijsers have entrepreneurship in their blood and when Michel met a Gambian student in Maastricht who wanted to start a bakery in his home country, father and son Huijser jumped at it. “The three of us set up a bakery. We mainly supplied French loaves and it ran quite well,” says Huijser. “But then a military coup was staged. The country's new rulers began interfering in bread prices which took all the fun out of it.” Exit bakery.

In The Gambia it is really always 30-35 °C. Not the most ideal temperature for fishing, processing and trading. But that hardly ever discourages the fishery industry. In 2002 Huijser came into contact with a fisherman from Katwijk, who lived in South Africa and visited The Gambia regularly. This Huig (Hugo) Ouwehand came with the idea of exporting fresh fish from The Gambia to The Netherlands and gave advice on that. “That too went quite well at first. Unfortunately,

things went wrong at the factory, where we could not put together a good team and there was a lack of adequate supervision.”

The fish brought ashore in The Gambia is not the problem, according to Huijser. “It is that good!”

The Huijsers appear to have more luck with the idea of exporting frozen fish. Through trading company Network Seafood in The Netherlands frozen Gambian fish is exported to Europe. The fish, from barracuda (for which there is still only a small market) to the favoured Atlantic sole, is processed, frozen and packed by the Atlantic Seafood Company in The Gambia.

Good quality fish by itself is not enough. “First we needed to gain the trust of the market. And we succeeded in doing that. We now supply various wholesalers in The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium and Spain. Last year we broke even. Unfortunately, the economic crisis has caused a sharp decline in the export of cuttlefish to Spain. On the other hand, there has been an increase in our exports of sole and we have gained new customers in Belgium and Germany. We are trying to get our sole into supermarkets too. It might help that since last month our Atlantic sole from Gambia has been rated ‘best choice’ by the online Fish Guide (Viswijzer).”

Banabana

Huijser is convinced that only few fishermen fish as sustainably as the fishermen from The Gambia. His company gets fish from about 500-600 canoes. There are four to five men in each canoe. The fishing method used is bottom-set gillnetting in the daytime, producing a daily catch of 30-60 kgs per boat. Most fishermen from The Gambia are Senegalese, who in West Africa have a reputation for being a people of fishermen. They live on and around the beach and only on the occasion of feasts do they leave for their homeland. According to Huijser he has minimal contact with these fishermen. “They just speak their tribe's language and no English or French.”

The fishermen initially supply to a ‘banabana’, a sort of agent, who also acts as an inspector. The fish from the canoes are stored in a depot and from there they go to the Atlantic Seafood Company. The

factory has its own ice machine and ice is delivered to the fishermen in coolers. Only a small number of fish are rejected. There are no quotas in The Gambia as yet, just the requirement to sell the fish in The Gambia itself. The canoe fishermen can sell their fish easily. A local smokehouse is one of the buyers and, of course, the fresh fish also make their way to the local market. According to Huijser the local people themselves do not consume sole, but mainly 'bonier fish'.

His factory is open six days a week. It is located in an existing building, adapted to meet European Union requirements. It employs 50 permanent workers, but at full production that can easily increase to 170 workers. Three quarters of the workers are female. Sorting and filleting is done by the men. After precooling, the fish, cuttlefish, lobsters and prawns go into the blast freezer.

"Putting together a good and reliable team took time. We really had to get used to the country's culture. We now have a good foreman, from Senegal, and a crew of loyal workers. They are proud of the factory and have confidence in the products we supply. Every day we operate a bus for our workers. Salaries are paid monthly, in cash. After years of falling down and picking ourselves up we are finally on the way up."

Every day a report on the activities of the factory in The Gambia is sent to Michel Huijser in The Netherlands, and every month he is in The Gambia for a week or so. He really likes it there now. "There are more Dutch people here. The country is truly developing, you can see that clearly. You can also notice it by the frequency of power failures; they are happening less and less." Problems with what is called corruption in The Netherlands cannot be avoided in a country like The Gambia. "Suddenly an inspector turns up on your doorstep, wanting to disconnect the power. We try to handle it as smoothly as possible."

MSC

Sole caught in The Gambia and exported to Europe is usually called Senegalese sole, but in The Netherlands it is referred to as Atlantic sole. The online Fish Guide (Viswijzer) states: "This sole is caught by small-scale fishermen using selective fishing gear causing no damage to the seabed. This sole is not being overfished, but a plan must be developed to prevent this in the future."

The Gambia sole fishery is in the process of being assessed for MSC-certification.