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MOZAMBIQUE

FIRST PERSON

Community Fisheries Net Bigger Catches

Residents oversee fish conservation in Lake Niassa



Photo: Lécio Munguambe

“It’s like magic has happened. We catch fish big enough for ourselves and to sell in big markets. This year, I managed to buy three new nets with money generated from the fish.”

— António João Cecílio Mtambo
Fisherman, Lake Niassa

António João Cecílio Mtambo is a fisherman from the community of Chuanga in Lake Niassa who used to depend on fine-meshed fishing nets that provided little sustenance for his family. “I used to struggle to provide for my family. The situation here was so bad that one could stand for hours in the lake and find nothing,” said Mtambo.

Lake Niassa is the world’s ninth largest lake and widely recognized as the most biologically important lake in the world. It is home to over 1,000 fish species—95 percent of them endemic to the lake—including tilapia, lake salmon, and hundreds of species of cichlids. Yet, fishing communities live well below the official poverty line and the lake’s fisheries are under threat from overfishing.

One of the biggest problems facing Lake Niassa communities was the use of donated mosquito nets, intended to protect against malaria but used for fishing instead. Mosquito net fishing is harmful because it removes all sizes of fish, fry, and even eggs from the lake. The nets also destroy the algae, a vital part of the lake’s food chain, and further damage fish stocks.

Since 2006, USAID and the World Wildlife Fund have been working to establish the Lake Niassa Reserve and have helped create 11 community fishing councils who now control all fishing activities in the lake. Mtambo belongs to a group of patrol officers who enforce the recommended fishing net sizes and prevent the lake’s resources from being depleted. With the councils in place, these communities have decided to ban all mosquito net fishing to preserve the fish in Lake Niassa.

As a result, communities around Lake Niassa are beginning to prosper, and the size and quality of catch has increased considerably. With fine-meshed nets, fishermen caught fish with an average size of three to five inches. Now, they regularly reel in fish that are up to 12 inches long.

Mtambo now provides enough for his family, and he brings in enough fish to sell in the nearby Lichinga market. He says “It’s like magic has happened. We catch fish big enough for ourselves and to sell in big markets. This year, I managed to buy three new nets with money generated from the fish.”