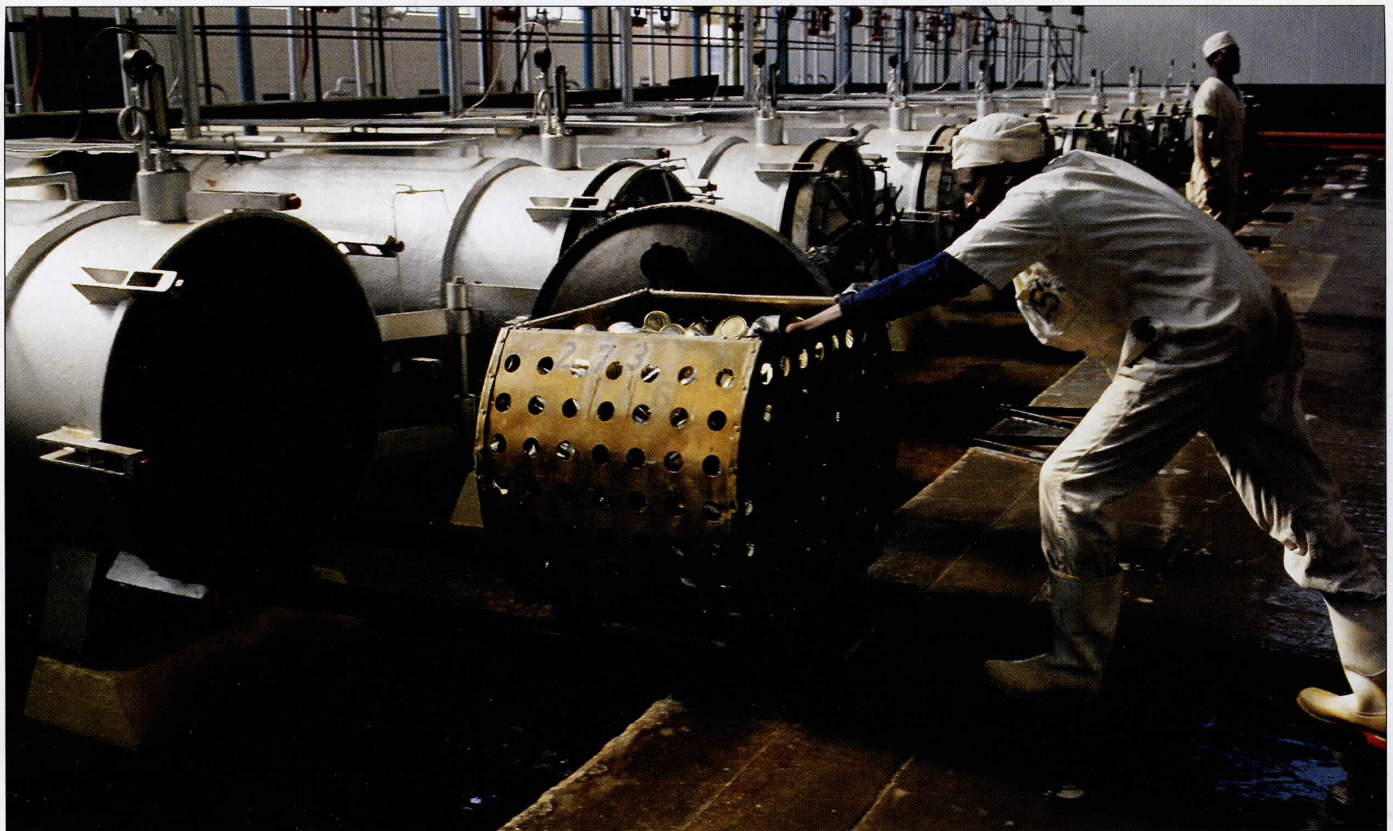




Pelagic Industry in Dire Straights

The pelagic fishing industry was the industry most severely affected by the adverse environmental conditions of 1993 to 1995. Catches in 1993 were allowed to exceed 100 000 tons for the first time since 1977 but Total Allowable Catches (TAC's) were drastically reduced from 125 000 tons in 1994 to 40 000 tons in 1995. When the quota for pilchard was filled in 1995, boats continued catching in Angola in joint ventures between Namibian and Angolan companies.



Dirk Heinrich

Namibia's purse seiner fleet has been laid up for most of the pelagic fishing season and activities at the four canneries have virtually ground to a halt.

At the time this sparked a controversy with some fishermen arguing that the shoals fished for in Angolan waters were part of the heavily protected shoals found in Namibian waters which had moved northwards, while others argued that it was a different stock.

During a survey conducted by the industry in April 1996 with 28 vessels, pilchard shoals were found in the north near Ambrose Bay and Terrace Bay and in the south in the vicinity of the Orange River. A provisional TAC of 20 000 tons were given to the industry based on the results of this survey. In June six purse-seiners, scouting in the north for pilchard, could not find pilchard shoals and vessels catching in Angolan waters were likewise unable to report the spotting of pilchard. Two pelagic surveys were conducted in June 1996 by the Norwegian research vessel *R.V.Fridtjof Nansen* with both surveys confirming the scarcity of adult pilchard. Around 770 tons of pilchard were landed as bycatch during this period bringing the total pilchard catch for 1996 to 1 700 tons. The effect on the industry was devastating, leaving seasonal workers employed in the canning industry without income for 1996.

Scientists contend that the pilchard stock is seriously depleted and should be given a chance of recovery by protecting the biomass in both Namibian and Angolan waters in the immediate future.

The 1997 TAC was set at 25 000 ton pilchard which was caught and landed within one month. Once again seasonal workers employed in the cannery received an income of only one month's work. The over capacity of over 25% in the Southern African fish canning industry was exacerbated even further by the collapse of the pilchard resource off Walvis Bay. 1997 is the fourth year in which the purse seine fleet has been laid up for most of the fishing season and

the four factories in "cannery row" have virtually been idle.

At a pelagic workshop held at the beginning of 1997 the industry was asked to submit proposals regarding a minimum tonnage which could sustain the industry on a break-even basis. The industry, on the contention that fish should be caught when available, proposed an initial quota of 30 000 tons to be announced not later than January of every year and that vessels should be allowed to catch for canning purposes immediately after spotting. Minister Hifikepunye Pohamba has been quoted as saying "We have to judge how much fish we can reasonably take this year without risking the prospects of future employment. This balancing is particularly important when stocks are as low as they are now". The industry proposed that further research be undertaken and the TAC be amended should the biomass be found larger than anticipated. The industry's proposal of having a statutory quota was based on the need of managing and planning the catching and processing effort ahead of time.

The pelagic industry proposed that an outright grant for the payment of a subsistence allowance to fishermen be made by Government to the pelagic fishing industry. For 33 pelagic vessels for a period of 6 months, the amount asked for was N\$ 4 455 000. So far the Namibian Government has not subsidised the fishing industry. A measure under discussion is the establishment of a Fisheries Bank which would make funds available at lower interest rates. As loans would be negotiated in liaison with the Ministry of Fisheries and Research, collateral not normally accepted by commercial banks, would be used as surety.

The collapse of the pilchard resource has underlined the necessity for, and urgent implementation of a coordinating mechanism between the countries sharing the resources of the Benguela system.