

# Morocco's illegal mussel pickers ply non-eco trade

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Fishermen shell mussels on a beach near Rabat on August 18. Thousands of Morocco's unemployed slum-dwellers head to the Atlantic coast every morning to scrape a living as illegal mussel pickers. But experts say they threaten the health of the marine ecosystem.

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The stretch of coast between Rabat and Casablanca, Morocco's economic capital renowned for its sprawling slums, or "bidonvilles," is the most popular destination for these unlicensed fishermen, who flock to the area at low tide.

The mussels that line the rocky sections of the coast are highly sought

after in Morocco, where they are served up in tajines, or cooked with onions and lemons, and are particularly in demand during the holy month of Ramadan.

So when the tide is out, the poachers scour the rocks with iron bars they use to catch the black-shelled mollusks, and with the full knowledge of the authorities, who are supposed to help protect the shoreline but instead turn a blind eye.

Unemployment is a major problem in Morocco—tens of thousands demonstrated in Casablanca in May demanding jobs—so the unauthorised mussel-pickers are tolerated, as an official in Harhoura, a seaside resort near Rabat, explained.

"We can't stop this informal activity because we have nothing to offer the fishermen as an alternative," he told AFP.

More importantly, from an ecological point of view, the government has never passed a law to encourage the conservation of the mussels, which play an important role in preserving the marine environment.

They act as filters for microbes found along the coast, including bacteria and algae, excreting nutrients that stimulate the growth of plant plankton, which in turn benefit the fish.

Their shells are also able to absorb metal pollutants, adding to concerns among environmentalists about their disappearance.

The sides of the rocks south of Rabat are scoured by the mussel pickers on a daily basis "and left bare," according to a Moroccan development NGO.

The poachers have much to gain from this activity. One person may

collect 200 kilos of mussels per day, which when shelled would yield about 3-4 kilos of meat, sold to buyers for around 50 dirhams (4.5 euros) per kilo and potentially earning the poachers between 100 and 150 dirhams per day.

There are no official figures on the number of poachers plying the trade along the heavily urbanised shoreline south of the capital, but an official in the Rabat prefecture estimated there are more than 2,000 during peak season.

At other times, the number drops by half.



Fishermen sort mussels on a beach near Rabat on August 18. The stretch of coast between Rabat and Casablanca, Morocco's economic capital renowned for its sprawling slums, or "bidonvilles," is the most popular destination for these unlicensed fishermen, who flock to the area at low tide.

During the summer months, they work in small groups down on the coast, and are also seen seated at the roadside, selling their mussels in the sweltering heat, which brings problems of its own.

"Exposing mussels to the sun for too long can make them a health hazard

to the consumer," said Abdelaziz Ben Aneur, a doctor in Rabat.

— Unstoppable —

But for all the risks involved, Moroccans are still happy to fork out for a bag of fresh mussels, and the poaching business helps many of the area's unemployed to support their families.

Brahim Touil, a seasoned poacher at Temara, south of Rabat, strongly defends his line of work, which he says enables him to feed seven people.

"If they tried to stop me from collecting mussels, I would beat myself to death," he told AFP.

For the moment it appears unlikely that anyone will try and stop him, but the National Institute for Fish Resources insists the exploitation of coastal resources is subject to regulations that must be adhered to.

"The rules for gathering mussels must be respected," institute director Mustapha Faik told AFP, adding that unfortunately "that is not the case."

Faik admitted that getting a permit to collect mussels can involve lengthy bureaucratic procedures at the ministry of fisheries.

"But the ministry provides information on this. If they want authorisation, of course they can get it."

Rachid Choukri, who heads marine studies at the environment ministry, laments that research on the environmental impact of mussel collecting in Morocco did not take into account the large informal sector.

"No authority is managing this, and it is time that the government

opened this file, for the benefit of our fish resources," he said.

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