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Mauritania's Economic and Social Ambitions Collide: The Story of Diawling Park

Intissar Fakir

Across Africa, countries are grappling with the trade-offs that come with the pursuit of economic growth. This is evident from my recent trip to Mauritania, where the narrative is familiar but far from simple. Economic ambitions are clashing with human and environmental interests, but the country's historical foundations and ways of governing might prove a drag on its grand plans for modernization.

Over the past decade, Mauritania has made progress on the security and political stability fronts but has largely skirted social justice and equity questions. Such questions are never too far from the surface, especially as the country moves closer to realizing its vision of a resource-rich economy. Years of energy exploration and the promise of fortune are gradually transforming the country.

I visited Mauritania to understand firsthand how its social, economic, and environmental dynamics are evolving. And in the story of Diawling National Park, I found a microcosm of the challenges facing the state and citizens. It is a place where the potential for energy wealth and all its benefits and drawbacks—related to the environment, social development and equity, economic growth, and the politics of a rentier economy—come together.

I was first drawn to the park because of its conservation role, which embodies the country's effort to reconcile the interests of people (the local community) and nature (ecological rehabilitation and preservation). My journey there began at dawn outside my hotel in the capital Nouakchott. As the sun was rising, the driver, my hosts, and I set off on the four-hour drive south just inland from the coast. Through miles of desertscape, we occasionally passed clusters of acacia trees, tents, and a smattering of buildings or vehicles as we drove through a small town or village.

At times, the driver would veer off course, choosing to navigate the roadside ditches instead of the battered road. He explained that heavy construction trucks, carrying building materials for Mauritania's newest port, have made the road unusable in long stretches.

On the road to Diawling National Park; Camels grazing along the road. Photos by Intissar Fakir.

The town of Tiguend on the Rosso highway en route to the park. Photo by Intissar Fakir.

As the desert gradually gave way to the floodplains of Diawling National Park, the expanse of the place came into view. The park sits on 16,000 hectares of land, flanked by the Senegal River on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. Between them lies an estuary where ecological and biological diversity is on display—from cracked muddy lands to sand dunes to marshes. The acacia, mangroves, and reeds spread throughout the area provide a refuge for an estimated 250 species of birds (including eighteen endangered species) and a host of mammals, fish, and reptiles (including the threatened leatherback sea turtle).

Roughly 25 miles from Diama, a border-crossing town into Senegal, the park is an example of national and transboundary efforts to revive and protect wildlife without diminishing the livelihoods of local communities.

Top: Flocks of birds congregate near clusters of vegetation and around water pools in the park. Middle: Warthogs are among the most commonly seen mammals in the park. Bottom: The sun sets on the Senegal River floodplain. Photos by Intissar Fakir.

Colliding Interests

The park has given hope to conservationists over the nearly thirty years since its establishment—a relatively short period in terms of conservation efforts. Created in 1991, the state-run ecological conservancy has been focusing on restoring biodiversity lost after dams were built to regulate the Senegal River delta water flows and flooding along the towns of Manantali in Mali and Diama in Senegal. The dams' new hydraulic management system had adversely altered the biophysical makeup of the area, with consequences for local populations dependent on its resources.

The park's restoration efforts have been focused on, among other tasks, rebalancing the levels of salt and fresh water to help regenerate some of the fauna and flora that was lost. The project has succeeded in reestablishing much of the ecosystem and allowing local populations to renew economic activities compatible with the park's rehabilitation mission.

Sporobolus Robustus, a type of reed that grows abundantly in the park. Local people, particularly women, make traditional mats from the plant. Photo by Intissar Fakir.

Still, the park faces ongoing and future challenges that put this progress at serious risk. After years of poverty and instability, Mauritania is avidly pursuing economic development. But these endeavors are putting the park and livelihoods of local communities in jeopardy—while the benefits are likely to be reaped by wealthy elites and investors. In 2016, work on a massive joint military and commercial port began in the town of N'Diago at the mouth of the Senegal River, about 155 miles south of Nouakchott and 44 miles from the park. The port is expected to be one of Mauritania's largest seaports, comprising a naval port, a quay, seven landing docks, and a shipyard for up to seventy vessels.

Former president Mohammed Ould Abdel Aziz launched the port project, claiming that it would provide greater connectivity and transportability into Senegal and Mali. Ould Abdel Aziz, who left office in the summer of 2019, has become a detested figure. His corrupt dealings, including his mismanagement of the country's ports and airports and his fishing deals, are the subject of

a parliamentary inquiry that might send him to trial. Raising further concerns, the port has a price tag of $325 million and appears to be state-funded, though there is little transparency or information on the relevant transactions. The Chinese company Poly Technology, which is infamous for bribery and money laundering in Africa, has been carrying out the construction. The company is blacklisted in Namibia, Nigeria, and Zimbabwe; and in 2013, the United States imposed sanctions on Poly Technology for violating the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act.

The port is expected to support Mauritania's budding energy industry. For years, oil and gas companies, including BP and Kosmos Energy, have conducted offshore exploration on the coast between Mauritania and Senegal. Although Mauritania is not currently producing oil or gas, it had been producing a limited volume of oil until 2017 and is expected to resume in the coming year or two. According to the former CEO of engineering firm SNC-Lavalin Mauritania, Hassana Mbeirick, due to the port's location it "is the future large offshore hub of the sub-region. Because in the near future, most of the logistics services related to the gas and oil industry will be housed in this port" (author's translation).

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Simply put, Mauritania's hopes for future fortunes are pinned on its energy potential. It is the central driver of various national efforts and featured in nearly every conversation I had throughout my stay. But while some see the flurry of recent offshore exploration as vital for the country, unsurprisingly, local environmental activists and residents are deeply worried—about the impacts of both the exploration happening offshore and the port.

Maymouna Mint Salek, a journalist and president of the local NGO Biodiversité, is one of a few to write and speak about the port's impact on the area. Tucked away in a quiet corner of the hotel lobby, Maymouna wearily described the situation to me: "The park is gravely threatened. If there is no awakening, no political will to say we need to protect this park, and no effort to reduce the impact, the park is going to disappear." She noted the "total opacity" around the construction project, adding that "the port is off-limits to civilian visitors. We couldn't even talk about the port; it's like a military secret. . . . We are sure it will be for gas and petrol [export], but there is little talk about that."

Maymouna noted that in addition to the absence of environmental impact studies or real understanding of the challenges and dangers involved and how to effectively mitigate them, Poly Technology's shady reputation and the government's blind ambition have put "a nail in the park's coffin."

Local Community Concerns

Most of the local population, Maymouna explained, is wary of speaking out about the issue. An estimated 9,000 to 10,000 people live in the N'Diago area, with most spread among more than forty villages. Villagers live on fishing, agriculture, and raising animals. Ethnically, the area is now largely Wolof and Haratine, and both are fearful of voicing their concerns given their vulnerable positions in Mauritanian society. "Local populations are worried because they feel their resources—which have already been affected by [energy companies' offshore exploratory] seismic activity that has impacted their fishing—are threatened. There is no discussion as of now to find a way to deal with their future," said Maymouna.

Livestock grazing in the park. Photo by Intissar Fakir.

The park's Bell Basin is where much of the local communities' economic activities, such as fishing, take place; Lines of drying fish. Photos by Intissar Fakir.

Mauritania gained independence from France in 1960 and has since struggled with political contestation, including several coup d'états and the spread of terrorism, as well as social exclusion. It was the last country in the world to outlaw slavery in 1981 and still functions, broadly speaking, as a caste system that continually sows discrimination and division.

Mauritania's highly stratified and ethnically segregated society is comprised of three groups: the Beydan (descendants of the Amazigh tribes of the Maghreb region who have been the country's elites and rulers); the Haratine (their former slaves, many of whom remain in conditions of de facto slavery); and the Afro-Mauritanians, which include four distinct ethnic groups—the Wolof, Halpulaar (Fulani), Soninke, and Bambara—who all largely originate from areas in the southern Mauritania.

"The system is based on racial injustice."

Back in Nouakchott, I met with Brahim Bilal Ramdhane, president of the Sahel Foundation for Human Rights that supports the Haratine population on social justice issues including access to education. Brahim said, "the biggest challenge we have is a political one: We have a system that's based on inequality—economic, social, and political. The system is based on racial injustice." The Haratine face racism, indentured servitude, oppression, a staggering lack of access to resources, and extreme poverty. The Global Slavery Index estimates that 90,000 Mauritanians are living as modern slaves, the majority of whom are Haratine.

The Afro-Mauritanian populations also experience discrimination and their own history of exclusion and repression since the country's independence. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, ethnic tensions intensified, leading to a campaign of repression targeting black Mauritanians. Coupled with a border conflict between Mauritania and Senegal, the situation culminated in violence and mass expulsions of tens of thousands of Afro-Mauritanians into Senegal and of Mauritanian nationals back into Mauritania. Afro-Mauritanians were denied belonging to Mauritanian identity based on ethnicity and skin color. The trauma of that experience remains, as does the fear of expulsion.

Collapsing homes in N'Diago due to the rising tide. The town is about 18 miles south of the port. Photo courtesy of Iba Sarr.

Today, the communities within and surrounding the area are concerned about how the ongoing gas and oil exploration will further contribute to climate change and its impacts. Iba Sarr, the president of the southern branch of the Free Federation of Artisanal Fishing (la Federation Libre de la Peche Artisanal) detailed the populations' concerns. The federation carries out training programs for the local fishermen descending from a long line of Wolof fishermen. Iba told me over the phone months after my visit that many homes in various villages in N'Diago have begun to collapse due to rising sea levels. He argued that the port's construction, several years of oil and gas exploration, and pollution have all contributed to this. He added, "our worry about the port is that our village is already being destroyed. The state is creating a town there, and it's going to change the area, bring in others, and limit our access to resources—and we

have no information about it. We have been here a long time, but we will get nothing. They will take our land and our resources, and we should have been told that they are doing this. They are not protecting us."

Iba Sarr in the park. Photo courtesy of Iba Sarr.

Since speaking with Iba, the government has accelerated construction and begun plans to supply the new port with electricity and a new road connecting it to the border town of Keurmacène. The government is also building a small town near the port, where they plan to relocate some of the affected villages from N'Diago, where both the port and park sit. Local villagers are weary of the government's promises of replacement housing and assert that what is offered is not enough to compensate for the hardship they face.

Hope Docked at Sea

Against this backdrop, Maymouna explains that it is unlikely the local population will make much of a fuss or get anywhere if they ask for more—and, therefore, their fate does not figure in the struggle for the park's future or in the plans for the area. As to whether the government can protect human and conservation interests while pursuing its economic ambitions, Maymouna does not hold out hope: "The government will respect its engagement to the park but will also carry out actions that harm it. Everyone knows that if we don't do anything to limit the impact of the port, the park will disappear physically, and everything that's been done over the years will be useless, thrown in the garbage bin."

> "Our life is the sea—we have nothing else."

Meanwhile, Iba continues to engage with the government about the future of local populations: "This is my work—every day trying to advocate with the government to see if there are ways they can mitigate the impact. We used to have an abundance of fish, and today we have fewer fish—the conditions have become so much scarcer. Russian fishing boats and Chinese and Turkish ships have also been pillaging the seas. Every day we try to defend our community." He went on to point out that "the problem is that we have powerful businessmen who are looking to exploit us and they tell the world that Mauritania does not have a fishing tradition, but we do. . . . We want to practice responsible fishing; our life depends on it."

"Our life is the sea—we have nothing else," said Iba. But Mauritania has other plans for that sea.

The Senegal River Delta at dusk. Photo by Intissar Fakir.

Correction Note: This text was amended on August 11 2020 to correct a mathematical percentage error.