

A photograph of a man in a red cap sitting on a wooden boat with a large white sail on a blue sea. The man is looking out at the ocean. The sail is partially unfurled. The boat is made of wood and has green ropes. The sky is blue with some clouds.

# all at SEA

The annual movement of Vezo fishermen from southern Madagascar to seek productive fishing grounds in the north is one of the world's most complex and least understood human migrations. But this ancient journey for survival is under threat. Faced with the dual menace of climate change and overfishing, many of the marine resources on which the Vezo depend are being pushed to extinction. For conservation scientist Garth Cripps, joining the migration was the only way to find out the truth behind this extraordinary exodus. ▶

TEXT BY CHRISTINA CORBETT

PATRICK BLANCHE



ABOVE A family of Vezo migrants sets up home on one of the Barren Islands. Apart from their fishing gear, they have few possessions.

OPPOSITE On the mainland village of Benjavily, just south of the Barren Islands, settled Vezo families build traditional sailing cargo ships, called *botry*.

PREVIOUS SPREAD 'Vezo' simply means 'fisherman' and applies to anyone who depends entirely on the sea for their existence.

In the distance a thin sliver of dazzling white sand begins to take shape. It broadens until it becomes an island – a fragile smudge on the rolling surface of the Mozambique Channel. In the shimmering heat of the tropical sun, it is difficult to see. There are no trees on the island. In fact there is no vegetation at all. And there is no fresh water. This is one of the Barren Islands, a remote offshore archipelago in western Madagascar. And for the Vezo migrants who have sailed as far as 1000 kilometres in dugout wooden pirogues to reach it, it will be home for the next nine months.

Every year thousands of fishermen and their families leave their villages on Madagascar's south-west coast to travel many hundreds of kilometres in search of better fishing grounds. They migrate with the seasons, following the movements of favoured fish species. On islands that are little more than sandbanks in the ocean, ragged temporary villages spring up. Families sleep under the sails of their boats. Besides their fishing gear, people have few possessions – cooking pots, a plastic basin

for washing and a drum for storing drinking water. Everything is brought in by pirogues, the Vezo's traditional handmade canoes.

This is one of the world's most poorly understood contemporary human migrations. So, for one Zimbabwean conservationist, the harsh realities of living a nomadic life with the Vezo were no obstacle to studying the dynamics of such a phenomenal journey.

'The migration was always something of a mythical journey for me,' explains Dr Garth Cripps, a conservation scientist working with the British marine conservation organisation Blue Ventures. 'In addition to the long tradition of the migration, today there is something of an El Dorado feeling about it. For many fishermen it's an oceanic gold rush in pursuit of the shark fins and sea cucumbers that fetch huge amounts of money on Asian markets.'

In May 2009, Cripps set sail from the remote village of Andavadoaka – 200 kilometres north of Tulear, the regional capital of Madagascar's arid south-west – in the company of a group of migrating Vezo families. He travelled on the northward migration, a two-month journey by sea, much of it across open ocean, to the Barren Islands.

ON ISLANDS THAT ARE LITTLE MORE THAN SANDBANKS IN THE OCEAN, RAGGED TEMPORARY VILLAGES SPRING UP



GARTH CRIPPS (2)

growth and foreign markets driving export fisheries have drastically changed the context in which migration now takes place.

'In the south-west, marine resources are under huge stress. Bleaching as a result of climate change and overfishing has devastated coral reefs, destroying once-productive fishing grounds,' says Cripps. 'On top of this, the demand for marine products from Madagascar, particularly in China, is driving fishermen to fish more and more intensively for certain species.'



'Very little is known about this migration,' he says. 'There are lots of unanswered questions. How many fishermen migrate and along what routes? Why do they do it, and how important is the migration to their livelihoods?'

'There has never been a more important time than now to understand its drivers and underlying causes,' he states. 'If we can understand the migration, we will gain an insight into the difficulties facing the fishermen and the condition of the marine resources they depend on. If we have this knowledge we can come up with conservation strategies that reflect this Vezo tradition and help them prepare for the future impacts of climate change on coral reef resources.'

For generations, migration has served as a socio-economic safety-valve – releasing pressure on marine resources caused by overpopulation and diminishing resources in a particular area. When resources aren't adequate to sustain a village's growing population, people move to previously unexploited areas that are either uninhabited or sparsely populated.

Historically this is thought to have allowed a natural equilibrium to be established between the number of people fishing and the health of the local marine system. But the combined pressures of climate change, rapid population

The Vezo are a unique group of semi-nomadic seafaring people from the south-west coast of Madagascar. The word Vezo, translated from Malagasy, means simply 'fisher'. A man is not born Vezo, but becomes Vezo by maintaining an existence entirely dependent on the sea. For hundreds of years, migration has formed a part of their struggle.

'Migrating is a survival strategy,' says Cripps. 'When you map population densities, you can see its logic. Where local resources have been destroyed, people move to areas that are less populated, where the reefs are in good condition.'

The patterns of movement are complex and intricate, with myriad migrations taking place across the entire west coast of Madagascar. These may range in distance from tens to hundreds of kilometres, and in timescale from short fishing trips lasting a few weeks to seasonal migrations of three to nine months.

The journey from the villages north of Tulear, like Andavadoaka, to the Barren Islands is one of the longest and most dangerous migratory routes. South-westerly winds storm up the Mozambique Channel and for vast stretches of the coastline there are very few places where a pirogue can find shelter. ▶

OPPOSITE Days at sea are long and dangerous. Fishermen set sail before sunrise and return to land as night falls. Every year there are casualties and deaths.

BELOW Fins on a shark this size are worth hundreds of dollars, but overfishing is pushing many species to extinction.

BOTTOM Fish meat dries in the sun as resting fishermen prepare food. All supplies have to be brought in from the mainland.

'Every afternoon the wind would rise and become too strong for the pirogue to sail in,' says Cripps. 'We would have to go ashore, finding a safe place to land in a river estuary. The surf was too big to sail through anywhere else and would easily have smashed the pirogue. But the estuaries themselves were full of obstacles: sandbanks and driftwood. Entering them was often a nerve-wracking experience.'

For those who don't know the coastline well enough to find the scattered safe landing places, there is little alternative but to keep sailing until they reach their destination. This can mean spending three days and nights at sea.

'If a family or a group of fishermen have to continue sailing, they fill an old turtle shell with sand and build a fire in it to cook on,' explains

MANY OF THE SHARK SPECIES THEY CATCH ARE CLOSE TO EXTINCTION. SOME ARE BARELY KNOWN TO SCIENCE

Cripps. 'And those who do reach the shore need to head back out to sea at around 03h00. Paddling through the dark water, negotiating the sandbanks with the surf crashing around you was always interesting.'

Faced with such a long and perilous journey, why do so many fishermen continue to migrate?

For those with families, the opportunity to escape the lean months of annual rice shortages in the arid south-west and move to richer fishing grounds remains a traditional motivation. But there is another wave of young Vezo migrants who are increasingly dominating the scene. For them the attraction of the Barren Islands is the archipelago's proximity to a massive offshore reef system that runs 60 to 80 kilometres from the coast. On submerged sea mounts, where the reef rises to the surface, sharks and sea cucumbers – both of high commercial value – can still be found in abundance.

'Without a doubt, what's attracting the newer Vezo migrants are the prospects of lucrative shark and sea cucumber fisheries. In the south these species – the only ones that fishermen can exploit commercially – are fished out. As a result, in the past five years many more people have started to migrate – and they are now travelling further and further,' explains Cripps.

Shark fins and sea cucumbers (*trepang*) – believed to be potent aphrodisiacs in southern Asia – sell for huge amounts of money on Far Eastern food markets. Along the west coast of Madagascar, local collectors buy the fins and the *trepang* from the fishermen before selling them on to export companies.

Shark fins of all sizes from any species will sell, but it is guitar sharks that are the most lucrative, with prices reaching more than 260 000 Madagascar ariary (about US\$125) per kilogram. A large adult guitar shark can yield six to eight kilograms of fins.

'A lot of the migrants are earning substantial amounts of money,' says Cripps. 'In a good month, if they find a sea cucumber ground that hasn't been fished out, or if they catch good sharks, they can make more money than many civil servants.'

But for many of the young fishermen, the money is spent as quickly as it is earned. Trips from the Barren Islands to the mainland to take the fish to market and fetch fresh water and food are often accompanied by long nights of partying. Many fishermen return with no more money than they left with.

'For some of the younger guys there is a stigma attached to saving money. It somehow shows that you are not a good fisherman – perhaps you're afraid that you won't be able



GARTH CRIPPS (3)

to go out to sea again the following day and hit the jackpot once more,' says Cripps. 'People believe the sea is rich and will always be there for them.' But many of the shark species they catch are close to extinction. Some are barely known to science.

Days at sea are long and hard. The fishermen set sail before sunrise to travel the 20 to 40 kilometres to the offshore reef. Once there they set their shark nets in the deep water, to depths of 200 to 300 metres, and then return to the underwater sea mounts to wait for low tide. Once the tide has fallen they can free-dive for sea cucumbers – diving without scuba equipment to depths of up to 25 metres. The pirogues return as night falls.

Every year there are casualties and deaths: divers who black out before they reach the surface – pushing their bodies beyond the edge of human ability – and fishermen who set sail in the morning, never to return.

Some teams of fishermen use old scuba gear to gather the sea cucumbers – a method that is illegal in Madagascar. With no training and no safety equipment, divers will descend repeatedly, routinely dropping to depths of 45 metres and only stopping when their air has run out. Divers with nitrogen narcosis and the 'bends' – where bubbles of nitrogen gather in the joints as a result of coming to the surface too quickly – are common. Both can be fatal.

PEOPLE BELIEVE THE SEA IS RICH AND WILL ALWAYS BE THERE FOR THEM

Can the gold rush continue? 'The demand for sea cucumbers and shark fins in Asia is pushing fishermen to the limits here,' comments Cripps. 'The huge demand is totally disconnected from the reality of the resources that the sea can provide.'

Furthermore, both sea cucumbers and sharks are keystone species in a coral reef ecosystem. By removing them to sell to foreign markets, fishermen are 'quickenning the demise of the reefs upon which they depend for food as well as their cultural identity,' he says.

Climate change and the rapid growth of Madagascar's coastal population are already putting huge strain on the country's marine resources. With the government's recent repeal of much of the legislation protecting them, continuing degradation and decline are inevitable. Yet for the Vezo there is no alternative but to continue their struggle with the sea.

'You have to admire the Vezo for their strength and determination,' says Cripps. 'There is nothing romantic about life as a migrant fisherman. It is a gruelling existence with no guarantee of success. Without protection, Madagascar's coral reefs simply won't be able to sustain the intense pressure they are under. They will be lost to future generations; so too will the seafaring life of the Vezo people.'

//online

The Vezo also formed the focus of Lee Middleton's 'An octopus's garden' (June 2008). Subscribers can access the full text from our online archives at [www.africageographic.com](http://www.africageographic.com)

Get the next issue of *Africa Geographic digimag* for a fully interactive Madagascar travel experience. [www.africageographicdigital.com](http://www.africageographicdigital.com)