

CAMILLE LEPAGE AWARD 2025

Documenting the Environmental and Social Crisis of Lake Victoria

The Camille Lepage Prize, a pivotal milestone in my professional career, would enable me to embark on the second chapter of my ongoing investigation into the disappearance of traditional fishing communities across Africa. This project will contribute to the seventh part of my long-term exploration of Indigenous communities living on the frontlines of climate emergencies worldwide—a cause I have dedicated myself to since 2016.

For this chapter, I will travel to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania to document the devastating consequences of climate change and overfishing—driven by growing demand from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia—on the traditional fishing communities surrounding Lake Victoria.

Lake Victoria is among the world's largest freshwater reserves, one of the most biodiverse environments on Earth, and a vital source of livelihood for over 40 million people living along its shores. Over the past three decades, a catastrophic convergence of global warming and overexploitation of fish stocks has pushed the lake on the brink of an environmental collapse.

Rising temperatures have disrupted fish migration patterns and breeding habits, contributing to the extinction of hundreds of local fish species, while the unsustainable demand from Western and Asian markets has led to the proliferation of commercially viable fish introduced during British colonial rule - such as Nile perch - to the detriment of indigenous ones. These dynamics have disrupted the lake's delicate ecological balance, causing the rapid depletion of fish stocks - which have declined by 35% since 2006 - and posing an existential threat to the survival of countless traditional fishing communities.

With the help of local journalists Henry Lubulwa, Joe Ojwang and Peter Saramba, and with the assistance of several local grassroots organisations such as the Lake Victoria Fisheries Organization, the Kenya Marine and Fisheries Research Institute, and the Lake Victoria Environmental Management Project, I want to document the consequences of this unprecedented environmental and social crisis on local fishing communities: as fishermen lose their livelihood, many are forced to migrate to cities in search of menial job, or to join criminal syndicates whose illegal fishing practices further exacerbate the lake's problems.

I will devote particular attention to the challenges faced by local women, who are even more vulnerable to these shifting dynamics. Traditionally confined to roles as fish sellers, many are now compelled to engage in transactional relationships to secure access to the declining fish stocks, leading to severe consequences for their safety, health, and well-being. I will also explore how local communities are trying to adapt to these new challenges by reviving traditional fish management practices and engaging in sustainable aquaculture, seeking viable solutions that could guarantee the long-term recovery of the lake and its environment. My work will focus on the areas of Kalangala in Uganda, Kisumu in Kenya, and Mwanza in Tanzania, where the effects of Lake Victoria's crisis are most evident, and the search for sustainable solutions is most pressing.

The previous chapter of my project examined the effects of climate change-induced sea level rise on fishing communities in West Africa. The story was published in media from eighteen different countries, became part of the #Dysturb and UNESCO campaigns, and was featured in several EveryDayClimateChange exhibitions.

With this second chapter, I want to deepen my body of work on this topic and shed further light on the devastating direct and indirect effects the Global North's economic model is inflicting on Africa's fishing communities. I also want to underscore the urgent need to promote sustainable fishing practices rooted in the Indigenous communities' ancestral relationship with their land and water, and emphasise the critical importance of environmental stewardship for the future of Lake Victoria and its people.