

The Western Sahara is home to immense phosphate reserves, rich fishing waters, and potential oil deposits. As it maintains de facto control of the urban and economic centers of the Western Sahara, Morocco benefits from the extraction of these natural resources. The Western Sahara is still considered a non-self-governing territory by the United Nations, and according to the UN Charter and the UN General Assembly's Resolution 1514 (XV) of 1960, the administering power of such a territory is responsible for ensuring that any economic gains in its colony must directly benefit the people of that colony. In other words, so long as official sovereignty is not recognized, a country cannot exploit the natural resources of a non-self-governing territory without the consent of the indigenous people and without re-investing the fruits of such exploitation in the territory itself.

Over the past few decades, Morocco has greatly benefited from the resources under its control in the Western Sahara, most notably from phosphate extraction. The Western Sahara is home to the world's second largest phosphate deposits, behind Morocco itself. As a critical component in mass-produced fertilizer, phosphate is becoming increasingly important as global food shortages persist. Today, despite protests by the Polisario leadership, Morocco continues to mine the Western Sahara's phosphate resources, particularly from the mine of Bou Craa, which contributes 10% of Morocco's total phosphate production.

The Western Sahara's second most profitable natural resource is its coastal fishing waters – some of the richest on the continent. European boats have been caught fishing off the Western Sahara, which is illegal according to international law. The European Parliament has defended its economic activities there, citing a 2007 free trade agreement [FTA] between Morocco and the European Union. While not recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara, the European Parliament argues that a 2004 legal opinion by UN Legal Counsel Hans Correll justifies the inclusion of Western Sahara waters, although Correll has since come out and argued that his opinion was misinterpreted by the EU. In contrast, the FTA signed between the U.S. and Morocco in 2004 explicitly excludes any economic activities originating in the Western Sahara from the terms of the agreement.

Finally, while exploration has not yet been possible, the presence of considerable oil reserves throughout West and North Africa suggests that the Western Sahara may be home to similar resources. Both the Polisario and Morocco have negotiated exploratory contracts with international firms and signed contracts that grant rights to the companies in the event that the conflict is resolved. Such agreements remain hypothetical, however, as no oil has been discovered, and the territorial dispute in Western Sahara continues to fester. Despite the efforts of the Polisario and international supporters of the Saharawi cause, phosphate mining and fishing in the Western Sahara continue without the input of the Saharawis. While secondary to its demand for self-determination, the Polisario Front thus includes Morocco's illegal exploitation of the natural resources of the Western Sahara in its calls for the greater involvement of the international community.

