
Honduras: Shrimp farmer as "official delegate" to Ramsar

On 23 November, 2002, at the Eighth Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention for the conservation of wetlands, held in Valencia, Spain, the Honduran environmental organisation, Committee for the Defence and Development of Flora and Fauna in the Gulf of Fonseca (Comité para la Defensa y Desarrollo de la Flora y Fauna del Golfo de Fonseca - CODDEFFAGOLF), denounced serious irregularities that involve its country's official representation, discredit the Ramsar Convention and undermine attempts to conserve mangrove forests, lagoons and other coastal wetlands.

The biologist and environmentalist, Jorge Varela, Executive Director of CODDEFFAGOLF, publicly denounced in Valencia that the "Government of the businessman, Ricardo Maduro, President of Honduras and an important shareholder in the shrimp-farming company known as Granjas Marinas San Bernardo (GMSB), did not pause to consider the international discredit he was exposing his country to when he had the audacity to send an employee of the much questioned shrimp farm, GMSB, to the International Ramsar Convention for the Conservation of Wetlands and allow him to submit a Draft Country Resolution to the Working Group on Mangroves, that had not had the consensus of civil society nor had it been approved by the Government."

Subsequently, Varela denounced this fact in his country, and a newspaper asked the President if those allegations were true, but he did not answer. However, the Honduran Association of Shrimp Farmers (ANDAH), took on the authority to do so, freeing the President of the Republic, ANDAH and GMSB itself, from responsibility. Therefore the responsibility falls on the "Official Delegate of Honduras" and the Ramsar Secretariat, particularly Ms. Margarita Astralaga who, from the beginning of the Convention was aware of Varela's complaint.

Varela affirms that it has been verified that the "only 'Official Delegate' sent by Honduras lacks experience and knowledge of wetland conservation and does not work with the Government, representing an offence to the country's state bureaucracy, as it is logical to suppose that there are officials having the necessary conditions to offer a worthy representation and who have been ignored and excluded from a very important process for the conservation of ecosystems of mangroves, lagoons, coral reefs, sea grasses, etc. Furthermore, the Honduran 'Official Delegate', Hector Motiño submitted a 'Draft Country Resolution' to a Working Group, which essentially seeks to benefit the discredited shrimp industry in Honduras, proposing policies and requesting funds aimed by the international community at the conservation of wetlands and the search for their rational use."

The denunciations point out that the 'Draft Country Resolution' "was not prepared publicly by the Government, or by civil society or by Honduran NGOs, but has probably been prepared in secret by consultants hired for this purpose, who in the 'Project' only refer to the mangrove ecosystems and 'industries' established there, ignoring that Honduras has different and important wetland ecosystems."

The impacts of shrimp aquaculture on mangroves are known and consented to by the government of Honduras and, according to Varela's accusations, "by the Ramsar Convention Secretariat itself,

whose official, Margarita Astralaga had already expressed her inclination towards the industry and particularly GMSB. Furthermore, the Resolution passed at the Seventh Conference of the Parties in 1999, instructing Governments to halt the expansion of shrimp farms in wetlands until studies recommending measures to mitigate and neutralise the negative impacts on local communities and the environment, is being violated."

The response to these complaints has been equally suspect. The Honduran Association of Shrimp Farmers (Asociación de Camaroneros de Honduras - ANDAH) has insulted, defamed and threatened Varela and the CODDEFFAGOLF authorities, re-launching old accusations against them, which they publish when this type of situation occurs, but never take to the competent courts, as they are false and their only aim is to cause discredit. Are they trying to distract attention from the irregularities that led to the shrimp industry having the right to vote at the Ramsar Convention and taking up a position --as Government of Honduras-- contributing to a true Resolution in favour of the conservation of mangrove forests, lagoons and other coastal wetlands not being adopted? This Resolution had been requested by NGOs struggling all over the world against the expansion of shrimp farms in these ecosystems.

The lack of response by the authorities has led Honduran society to ask: "President Maduro, is CODDEFFAGOLF's accusation true?" There are other key questions asked by CODDEFFAGOLF that are still pending and that should be answered both by the Honduran authorities and the Ramsar officials if they want the Convention to maintain its credibility: "Who accredited a GMSB employee as the Honduran Government's Official Delegate to the International Ramsar Convention, and what guarantee gave him the audacity to submit a "Draft Country Resolution" that had not been approved by the Government?"

In the meanwhile, industrial and unsustainable shrimp production continues, implying the felling of mangroves, destruction of lagoons and other wetlands to build breeding ponds and the contamination of estuaries. While for the local communities, the installation of shrimp farms has brought with it the loss of access to their traditional sources of food, firewood and income and lack of respect for their human rights, leading to 12 murders of fishers and various other people injured by bullets in events related to the shrimp farm security officials, that have gone unpunished. For the environment, this uncontrollable industry has other impacts: the loss of tropical forests that absorb green-house gases during the year, contributing to lessen global climate change, the loss of habitats for the native migratory birds; it has also involved the loss of an ecosystem protecting the coast from erosion and tropical storms, capturing sediments and contributing to maintaining the coral reefs, essential to local biological diversity, as mangroves are sites where most of the fish spawn, hosting plants and animals only to be found in mangrove ecosystems.

Article based on information from: "¿Será cierto presidente Maduro?", Ramón W. Nuila, La Tribuna, Honduras, 12 December 2002; "Vergüenza internacional", Convención Ramsar, COP 8, CODDEFFAGOLF, Valencia, Spain, 23 November 2002, <http://www.redmanglar.org/noticia28.htm> ; "¿Corrupción en la Convención Ramsar?", open letter from Jorge Varela Márquez, Executive director, CODDEFFAGOLF, to colleagues, members, friends, sympathizers, and members of the Ramsar Convention, sent by the author, e-mail: cgolf@sdnhon.org.hn