
Mangrove destruction by oil in Niger Delta

Mangrove is a thriving and fragile ecosystem that depends on other nearby ecosystems – the river and salt marshes. In turn, the health of the sea and of coral reefs depends on a healthy mangrove. Everything is connected.

Mangrove forests are also very important to many human communities who live around them and use them in a variety of ways to ensure their food sovereignty with seafood, meet their housing needs with the wood obtained for the construction of houses and poles, and use the various products of mangroves for their livelihood. Those communities all over the world have historically developed a sustainable relation with this rich ecosystem as long as they have been using it on small-scale and to cater for local needs through a deep knowledge of its multiple functions, with women being the most involved.

Despite the importance of mangroves for the environment and the people, they are being harrassed by large scale activities – oil extraction among them.

A document by Oilwatch on the impact of oil activities in mangroves (1) highlights that they imply in the first place deforestation to build facilities - drilling rigs, camps, wells, opening of roads, helipads, etc. The area is also destroyed by the drillings that are done by dredging which involves widening and making deeper the existent channels or opening new ones. The wider and deeper the channel, the more damage is done to the ecosystem. The construction of these channels alter the natural hydrology of mangrove forests and makes them more vulnerable to erosion - the flow of freshwater to the mangroves is disrupted, the flow of tidal water to the mangroves and within them is altered thus disrupting the drainage pattern, vegetation is altered, soil is disturbed. In turn, soil disturbance may cause changes in soil and water pH that could cause a critical deterioration of the quality of the mangroves.

The presence of oil in mangroves due to accidents, practices related to cleaning of wells or spills produces a critical pollution which can remain in the area for many years.

In Nigeria, large areas of mangroves of the Niger Delta have long been damaged by oil spill occurring regularly. It is said that up to 1.5 million tons of oil has been leaked there in the past 50 years.

Mangrove destruction for oil extraction has brought no benefit to Nigerian rural communities: life expectancy has fallen to some 40 years over two generations, there is very limited access to clean water, farmlands have been affected, ground and drinkable water has been polluted and fishing has been wrecked by the greasy oil that regularly leaks from any of the many hundreds of old pipelines located in highly built up areas and near to fishing ponds and farmlands. The pipelines cross the region to cater for United States' oil needs – 40% of its crude imports comes from the Niger Delta.

"We lost our nets, huts and fishing pots," "We have lost our forest", said Chief Promise, village leader of Otuegwe, to John Vidal, environment editor of The Observer who reported a trip (2) to the place of the Niger Delta where an oil pipe explosion in 2008 had killed at least 100 people. He waded into the

swamp until he could smell the oil and ended swimming in pools of oil crude. He quoted the claims of Chief Promise "We told Shell of the spill within days, but they did nothing for six months".

Tragic oil spills in the Niger Delta have occurred almost unnoticed with no major headlines devoted to them. Indeed, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico caused by the explosion that wrecked BP's Deepwater Horizon rig last year is less than the oil leaking out of the delta's network of terminals, pipes, pumping stations and oil platforms every year.

On 1 May of 2010 a ruptured ExxonMobil pipeline in the Nigerian state of Akwa Ibom spilled more than a million gallons into the delta over seven days before the leak was stopped. Local people demonstrated against the company but they were attacked by security guards. In the first semester of 2010 there had been four oil spills. The Nigerian Environmental Rights Action group is now demanding 100 million dollars from ExxonMobil for their failure to compensate the devastating losses, and the illness due to the oil company's exploration activities and major oil spills last year.

The recovery of a mangrove forest may take decades under the premise that new oil spills do not occur. For the surrounding communities the destruction of their livelihood and environment is definitive.

Article based on information from: (1) « Explotación petrolera en Manglares », Oilwatch, Boletín Tegantai Nº10, http://www.oilwatch.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=112&Itemid=43&lang=; (2) "Nigeria's agony dwarfs the Gulf oil spill", John Vidal, The Observer, www.guardian.co.uk, May 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/30/oil-spills-nigeria-niger-delta-shell>