
Malaysia: Converting mangrove forests into shrimp farms

The dark green and yellow Great Tit (*Parus major*) is a bird species that makes its home in Malaysia's coastal mangrove swamps and both are disappearing as the country redoubles its attempts to boost agriculture. Commercial farmers are turning swamps in Kuala Selangor, 90 km (56 miles) north-west of the capital, Kuala Lumpur, into shrimp farms and threatening a delicate ecosystem that is home to hundreds of species.

Wood and marine products from the mangrove forests provide a source of income for villagers. But also, mangroves form a natural protective buffer against rough seas or tsunamis, like the one that struck parts of peninsular Malaysia last December and showed the importance of mangrove swamps for the ecosystem and human lives.

The mangrove forests shielded several Indonesian islands and Malaysia's northwest coastline from the worst effects of the tsunami, prompting Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to call for their preservation. "Mangroves should not be touched, they act as a barrier for big waves...they break the waves," Abdullah said.

Mangroves have luxuriant and complicated root systems that combat soil erosion by helping to bind the shore together, forming a shield against destructive waves and sustaining a varied ecosystem that is home to insects, fish and otters. Blue and orange fiddler crabs scuttle sideways across the swamp in Kuala Selangor along with mud skippers and snails while silver-leaf monkeys swing from the branches of trees through which flit 156 varieties of birds.

But an 8-km (5-mile) stretch of mangrove forest was turned into a shrimp farm in Kuala Selangor early this year. Forestry Department statistics show that peninsular Malaysia had 85,800 hectares (214,500 acres) of mangrove swamp forests in 2003, down from 86,497 hectares in 2002.

"We can't look for snails and other things here. We used to get about 30 kg (66 lb) previously but now there is none. We just scrounge around for what is left here," villager Hassan Yatim said as he gathered mangrove tree poles for his vegetable plot.

The shrimp farms have also changed the lifestyle and diet of animals in the Kuala Selangor swamp. Kingfishers, shrikes and waders now head for the farms for easy pickings instead of hunting their prey in the thick mangrove forest within the 200-hectare nature park. Sleek otters also head straight for the shrimp farms, particularly when farm workers distribute feed to the shrimp.

Despite the threat to the ecosystem, the Forestry Department says the farms are legal as part of the Kuala Selangor swamps are now classified as agricultural land rather than the forest reserve they were formerly.

While short-term benefits go for the companies behind the shrimp business, the high losses in terms of environment and livelihood will be born by local people.

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