
Industrial shrimp farming in mangrove areas must be banned

World perception about mangroves is changing positively. Once described as insect-infested foul-smelling wastelands, they are now being more aptly called "roots of the sea", "amphibious rainforests" or "coastal nurseries". This new attitude constitutes a positive first step towards their conservation, because a valued ecosystem stands a better chance of being protected than one perceived as a useless wasteland.

This change in attitude is to a large extent the result of the activities of numerous NGOs working together with local communities struggling to protect their mangroves, and generating awareness at the national, regional and international level about the social and environmental importance of mangrove ecosystems.

Every July 26, many of those organizations carry out a number of organized activities under the common banner of "Save the Mangroves!". This day was chosen International Day of the Mangrove commemorating that day in 1998, when a Greenpeace activist from Micronesia -Hayhow Daniel Nanoto- died of a heart attack while involved in a massive protest action led by FUNDECOL and Greenpeace in Ecuador. During this action the local community of Muisne, together with the NGOs, dismantled an illegally placed shrimp pond in an attempt to restore this damaged zone back to its former state as a mangrove forest.

Actions such as the above are still unfortunately necessary and common throughout the tropical and subtropical regions -where mangrove forests occur- because powerful commercial interests –mostly linked to shrimp production, oil and gas extraction, mining and tourism development- threaten the mere existence of this unique ecosystem. Among these, industrial shrimp farming poses one of the gravest threats to the world's remaining mangrove forests and the wildlife and communities they support. In words of Alfredo Quarto, director of Mangrove Action Project, "an estimated 1 million hectares of coastal wetlands, including mangroves, have been cleared worldwide for conversion to shrimp farms that range from one-half to hundreds of hectares each. A telling sign of this boom-and-bust industry, approximately 250,000 hectares now lie abandoned due to disease and pollution."

The expansion of such destructive activity is fuelled by voracious consumer demands for cheap shrimp in the United States, Canada, Japan, and Europe. As a result, mangroves that provide for the livelihoods of poor local communities in the South are destroyed to feed the already well fed and to increase the profitability of rich shrimp producers and transnational trading companies.

The current situation can therefore be described as one where, on the one side, the world has become more aware about the social and environmental importance of mangroves, while, on the other side, unsustainable production and consumption is leading to mangrove destruction and to an increase in poverty in mangrove-dependent communities.

This paradoxical situation needs to change. Large-scale industrial shrimp farming must be banned because of the already proven negative social and environmental impacts it entails. Mangrove management should be put in the hands of those who know how to manage them sustainably and

whose interest lies in their long-term conservation: the local communities. Shrimp will of course become more expensive in northern markets, but will be again freely available –together with the other means of livelihood mangroves provide- to those who most need to feed themselves.

The solution is obvious but not easy to implement. It requires a political will that can only be achieved through increased pressure on governments –in both North and South- to make them comply with what they themselves have defined as socially equitable and environmentally sustainable development –and have committed themselves to put in practice. In most mangrove areas, this simply means banning industrial shrimp farming and devolving management to the hands of mangrove-dependent local communities. As simple as that.