
Ecuador: Certified shrimps

The certification process for organic shrimps in Ecuador is promoted by Naturland, a German certifying company that launched processes in 1996 to certify shrimp farming companies in the country and to achieve accreditation of a green seal enabling exporting companies to enter markets with better prices and standards of quality. The main markets for organic shrimps are Germany, Switzerland, France and the United Kingdom.

In Ecuador, approximately 1,000 hectares of shrimp farm ponds have been certified. Part of the certification process requires compliance with Naturland standards -prepared with the support of the German cooperation agency GTZ– with national legislation and the obtaining of social benefits derived from this activity.

Certification is viewed by some environmental sectors as a way of promoting multi-sectoral participation –NGOs, the private sector and the governmental sector– although the participation of communities involved in the process appears as a secondary consideration. The potential benefits of environmental certification in Ecuador are seen as follows: market access, reduced costs, social benefits and increased employment.

* Market access: “They hope to attract green consumers who pay higher prices for products guaranteeing lower environmental impacts in their production process.” However, most of the German consumers of the Deutsche See company, the largest fish supplier in Germany, which has been selling “ecological” shrimps since 2003 from shrimp farms certified by Naturland, do not know that 40 per cent come from aquiculture. The consumers believe they are buying fish from the wild, and also suppose that there is respect for the environment, the communities and the laws of the country of origin of the product. However, in practice this is not the case.

* Reduced costs due to savings in the purchase of agrochemical products and benefits to the companies, among which “less conflictive relations with the workers, local communities and environmental groups, reduction of erosion and other environmental and economic benefits.” The comparative advantages of producing in the South also cut costs: fewer environmental regulations, cheap labour, and the environmental cost of the destruction of mangroves is not considered, resulting in a much higher ecological debt generated by this export activity.

* Social benefits: “The reduction of toxic chemicals, provision of basic working equipment for the workers, construction of basic sanitary facilities and provision of recreation areas and social services have improved the welfare and productivity of the workers. These benefits are enjoyed by local communities.” In the case of shrimp farms, there is no evidence of improvement for the local communities that continue to face restrictions in land available for agriculture, loss of free access to the remaining mangroves, loss of water resources, implying a reduction in their income and loss in their quality of life.

* Increased employment: “The growth of exports has generated more employment.” This statement, in the case of shrimp farming does not coincide with the true situation. Because of the crisis in the

sector, the number of workers has dropped and the level of employment in shrimp farms is fairly low, in addition to the fact that employment is temporary. In general, workers are not hired from the same area and working conditions are not among the best. If we compare this statement with the number of jobs lost because of mangrove destruction and the effects on traditional fishing, activities that used to be carried out by families, the balance is negative for the shrimp industry.

This vision of the potential benefits of certification does not consider that the promotion of these export activities and their endorsement as a model has been done to the detriment of food sovereignty and that export activities such as shrimp farms, palm tree and banana tree plantations and flower growing, have shown their negative effects in the country.

The certification of shrimp farms has not brought with it either social or environmental benefits, reforested mangrove areas have not been returned to the ecosystem and problems still subsist with neighbouring communities that no longer have free access to the remaining mangrove areas and furthermore, have not been consulted.

The standards and procedures used in certification processes are not transparent, the information is not made public, the community has not been consulted and they do not comply with national legislation.

In practice, large companies are benefiting from a green discourse that does not correspond to what is happening in the sector, and are not even complying with the standards they are obliged to conform with to obtain certification. They are more concerned over cleansing their image.

Certification responds exclusively to an issue of Northern consumers -ensuring "cleaner" food- rather than improving conditions in the mangroves and local communities.

The development model in which certification is framed privileges the exportation of products to satisfy consumers from industrialised countries before improving production for national markets, even at the cost of destroying ecosystems, displacing the population and placing at risk the ancestral users of coastal ecosystems.

By: Ricardo Buitrón C., E-mail: manglares@accionecologica.org

Abridged version of the article "Certification of organic shrimps. A Green Seal to impunity" available (in Spanish) at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Ecuador/camaron.html>