
Burma: Upstream deforestation and shrimp farming are destroying the mangroves

The WRM have been denouncing the extensive destruction of forests in Burma through deforestation processes --among which commercial logging plays a major role-- resulting in serious impacts on the environment and on the livelihoods of local people.

One of those impacts is the sedimentation of rivers. Deforestation occurring in highland forests throughout central Burma triggers off several environmental alterations such as landslides and soil erosion. Once the soil is deprived of the several protective, cohesive and integral functions provided by the forest, it is prone to run off and deposit in the bed of the rivers, causing sedimentation and consequent impacts downstream. One of them is the impact on mangroves.

The Irrawaddy River (see WRM Bulletin N° 54) has a sedimentation rate which is the fifth highest in the world behind the Yellow, Ganges, Amazon, and Mississippi rivers. The silt deposition in the Irrawaddy River has consequences on the mangroves of the Irrawaddy Delta which are one of Burma's coastal mangroves --some of the most degraded or destroyed mangrove systems in the Indo-Pacific. Previous estimates announced that if the situation between 1977 and 1986 regarding sedimentation was maintained, all the mangrove forests would disappear in fifty years.

Additionally, mangroves are being increasingly converted into fish and prawn industrial farms, mainly oriented for export. In 1990, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) in office proceeded to declare Burma "open to free enterprise." For the US Commercial Service, Burma provides "good opportunities" for shrimp farming. Shwe Ayeyar Co., Ltd. and Regal Integrated Marine Resources Ltd. signed a memorandum of understanding on a shrimp farming project at Kan Maw Island, in the Tanintharyi Division on May 2, 2001. It is reportedly the largest foreign investment project in the livestock-breeding sector. The development of industrial shrimp farming has been gaining momentum in Burma since 1998 and spread rapidly along the coastal zone. Government data of Fiscal Year 1999/2000 claimed over 130,000 acres of fishponds, a dramatic increase from a decade earlier.

To make matters worse, the industrialising process of shrimp production in Burma has also been allegedly connected to forced labour within an economy tightly controlled by the military. According to the Mon Information Service, the present ruling military regime has maintained a government prawn-raising project at Kyauk Minaw and Kanyawbyin villages in Lauglon township solely by means of forced labour and extortion from the local population and prawn businessmen. Local prawn businessmen have been required to contribute young prawns, according to the quotas set by the government, while several local villages have had to contribute labour for the construction of all necessary buildings and ponds.

At the other end of the chain, well-fed consumers are being served prawns imported from Burma --or offered to buy furniture made from teak unsustainably logged in Burmese forests-- unaware that they are contributing to the widespread social and environmental destruction of the country's resources and of its peoples' livelihoods. The beauties of globalisation!

Article based on information from: "Myanmar Coast mangroves", WWF, http://www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/im/im1404_full.html ; The U.S. Commercial Service, <http://www.usatrade.gov/website/CCG.nsf/CCGurl/CCG-BURMA2002-CH-2:-0045F7E4> ; "Boycott imports from Burma", CFOB, <http://www.cfob.org/CanadianPolicy/imports.shtml>