



Development & Aid, Environment, Headlines, Latin America & the Caribbean

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By IPS Correspondents

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MUISNE, Ecuador, Jul 28 1999 (IPS) - Up to her knees in mud, where she is looking for crabs, and other shellfish in the coastal mangrove swamps here, Gladys Cortez shrugs her shoulders.

"Before, we could always find hundreds of conch shells and crabs," she says wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. "Since the shrimp farms started, however, there are now less and less. How are we supposed to feed our families?"

Like thousands of other Ecuadorians who live along the coast who depend on the mangrove ecosystems for their livelihood, Cortez traveled to this small island to demand an end to the expansion of export-oriented commercial shrimp farms.

The shrimp farmers are blamed for destroying more than 65 percent of the Ecuador's mangrove habitat, and continue to expand to meet the demand for shrimps by the United States, Japan, and western Europe.

The National Coalition to Defend the Mangroves, comprised of community groups and environmentalists, are currently holding a week of activities ranging from reforestation projects to Marimba dance concerts, to workshops on how to prepare traditional food harvested from the mangroves.

"This industry is destroying our natural resources, and with it our history, customs, and culture," the coalition announced in a declaration that called for a moratorium on the development of new shrimp farms.

The thick muddy swamps and dangling branches and root systems of the mangroves that provide important habitat, protection and nutrients for numerous fish, bird, mollusk and crustacean species.

By harvesting the wild shrimp, shells, crabs and fish, thousands of families along have co-existed with the mangroves for hundreds of years, without impacting the mangroves.

"Mangroves also purify the water and protect the coast from erosion, storm and El Nino," says Lider Gongora, executive director of FUNDECOL, an environmental organisation here.

All this began to change in the 1980s with the arrival of the lucrative commercial shrimp farms which clear-cut the mangroves to construct aqua culture ponds.

The net profits of the farms are so high that the idea caught on and spread rapidly along the coast. Now shrimp are Ecuador's third largest export after oil and bananas. Depending on how large and intensive the farm, the gross income of one-hectare of shrimp farms ranges from 5,000 to 15,000 US dollars per year.

Once cut, the mangrove cannot fully recover for more than 100 years and all the benefits from the ecosystem are lost, says Jose Delgado, president of Ecological Coastal Committee, an environmental group based in the coastal province of Guayas.

"The waste water from the farms also completely pollutes the surrounding area with antibiotics and other chemicals used to fight diseases that frequently plague the pools densely populated with shrimp," he adds.

The National Chamber of Aquaculture, a powerful shrimp industry trade association based in the coastal city of Guayaquil, argues that commercial shrimp farms employ 200,000 workers in this country.

But Gongora says that this is nothing compared the benefits previously received by the mangroves. "About 10 families can live off of one hectare of mangrove swamp, while a shrimp farm of one hectare only employs four people," he argues.

"Without a way to support themselves, many people have moved to the cities where the unemployment problem is so serious many end up turning to crime, drugs and prostitution in order to survive."

About 56 percent of the shrimp from farms in Ecuador is exported to the United States, while 31 percent goes to Europe and 12 percent to Japan, according to the Quito-based Ecological Action, an environmental group.

"There is a complete lack of awareness among consumers in other countries who don't know the impact they are having here in Ecuador by consuming shrimp from shrimp farms," says Elmer Lopez, a campaigner with Greenpeace International, who took part in the Muisne protest.

Worse, shrimp consumption by industrialised nations is expected to increase in coming years as population rises.

In the United States, for example, shrimp consumption doubled in the last decade to one billion pounds per year, making it one of the most popular seafood in the country, according to the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute.

While the destruction of the mangroves is prohibited by federal law, FUNDECOL says the government has done nothing to stop their destruction.

Gongora says the organisation has officially filed more than 100 complaints about different illegal shrimp farms in Esmeraldas. Now, when FUNDECOL discovers an illegal shrimp farm it breaks the muddy wall down before it the pool starts operation.

"And then if the damage is not too bad we try to replant mangrove trees," adds Marcelo Cotera, who acts as president of the organisation.

One of the main obstacles to protecting the environment from shrimp farms, according to Yolanda Kakabadse, the Minister of Environment, is an overworked judicial system that gives no priority to preserving mangrove ecosystems.

"Mangrove areas were considered useless land and building the shrimp farms was considered a way to make the land valuable," says Kakabadse, who co-signed a presidential decree last week prohibiting the development of new shrimp farms.

Illegal shrimp farms have only been given minimal fines, if that, she says. Since shrimp farming is so lucrative, the fines do not stop the illegal cutting of the mangroves.

"Judges and all the other people related to the legal system here have tons and tons of paper work on their desks and they are not aware of the value of an mangrove ecosystem," Kakabadse told IPS.

She is currently working on an environmental education programme, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, for people working within the legal system on Ecuador's coast.

"While awareness about the importance of maintaining mangroves is growing, judges need to understand why communities are filing suits against illegal shrimp farmers and not put these cases at the bottom of the pile," she says.

Kakabadse says that the government's job should not be to police to coast, but to give local communities the power to monitor the illegal growth of shrimp farms.

"The traditional pattern of state control is not a good monitoring system because it lacks resources and the moment we turn our back the illegal farms will continue," she says.

She sees a growing conservation awareness among the commercial farmers who are beginning to value the mangrove ecosystem that protects their farms as well in the form of water purification and protection from storms and El Nino.

Kakabadse and the National Chamber of Aquaculture point to examples of some shrimp farmers who have started mangrove reforestation projects.

But Cecilia Cherez, who coordinates the mangrove protection campaign at Ecological Action, says these efforts are barely noticeable in comparison to the destruction of the mangroves.

"Of the hundreds of hectares that have been reforested, hundreds of thousands of hectares of mangroves have been cut," she says.

Cortez, who traveled from the small coastal town of Bolivar near Muisne, has organised other women who harvest wildlife from the mangroves and monitors the shrimp farms in the area.

"If the mangroves disappear," she warns, "so will our culture."
