
Guatemala: Isla Chicales – public lands should be managed by communities

The community of Isla Chicales, located in the municipality of Nueva Concepción in the department of Escuintla, is made up of 140 families who benefit directly and indirectly from fishing and other activities in the mangrove ecosystem where they live. Several years ago, when they observed signs of the degradation of the ecosystem, they undertook action and measures for its conservation, including community-based regulation of fishing and hunting, and reforestation in the degraded areas of the mangrove forest.

Although “isla” means “island” in Spanish, Isla Chicales is not an island in geographical terms; its name refers to the fact that the community is surrounded on all sides by bodies of water like rivers and streams. But the marshes and mangroves of this community are in fact becoming “isolated” and degraded by a major wave of land grabbing, for the establishment of industrial plantations of watermelons, sugar cane, bananas and oil palm and industrial shrimp farms.

As a result, it is becoming increasingly impossible for the local residents to grow food, lease land and fish in the area. This has created a dramatic situation that places family farmers and fishers in serious danger, as they are deprived of their means of livelihood and survival and their food sovereignty.

During a visit to the community in the month of May, representatives of the World Rainforest Movement and Redmanglar Internacional were able to observe the impacts of monoculture plantations on local livelihoods. They gathered testimonies from local residents, who emphasized the problems caused by the expansion of sugar cane plantations, and land grabbing in general; the use and abuse of waterbodies, including the diversion and damming of the rivers; the use of agrochemicals; and the impacts caused by the practice of burning sugar cane fields.

When we asked the local residents, “What does the mangrove mean for coastal communities?” Their answers included the following:

- shelter for fish
- a barrier against storm surges
- generation of a good living environment (microclimate)
- a source of firewood and wood for building our homes
- a source of work for women (fishing)
- great biodiversity
- subsistence and small-scale commercial fishing
- a close relationship with the estuaries (fishing)
- a source of healthy food, accessible to even the poorest, the oldest, everyone.

“It is our life, we eat and we live because of it,” concluded one of the local representatives, earning the full agreement of all of his peers.

In the meantime, during a recent visit by members of the board of directors of Redmanglar

Internacional, an assessment was conducted of the environmental impacts experienced by the community in Isla Chicales since the arrival of industrial agricultural plantations and shrimp farms. These were some of the findings:

- These activities do not respect environmental legislation: rivers and other water sources are being dammed; trees are being cut down, including those considered as protectors of the water and soil, such as the mangrove tree that is a protected species; untreated wastewater is dumped into the rivers.
- These activities are also causing the degradation of the buffer strip of vegetation along the estuaries. The continuous advance of the agricultural frontier has resulted in the violation of a regulation which stipulates that a 50-metre-wide buffer strip of natural vegetation must be left on both banks of rivers as a means of protecting the river from soil erosion and thus preventing the sedimentation of parts of the river and estuaries in coastal areas. The reduced capacity for self-purification of these ecosystems ultimately leads to the death of the mangrove, with the resulting impacts on the associated fauna and, consequently, local communities.
- The impacts caused to the mangrove ecosystem lead to a loss of biodiversity because of the significance of these plant formations in the life cycle of coastal ecosystems and river basins. These impacts also leave coastal ecosystems more vulnerable to some of the effects of climate change, such as rising sea levels and the resulting penetration of seawater along the coast, diminishing the natural capacity of the mangrove to reduce the risk of flooding and mitigate marine intrusion and the consequent salinization of groundwater. In addition, the deterioration of the mangrove significantly reduces the production of nutrients for marine species, which considerably reduces the populations of marine species that serve as a source of livelihood and survival for local communities.

The role of local communities in the defence of mangroves

The concession of large areas of mangrove to private interests by the government authority responsible for public land reserves, OCRET, has resulted in a rise in land grabbing and the loss of food sovereignty for local communities. Years ago, OCRET granted more than 250 hectares of mangrove to private businessman José Bonilla, who specializes in melon plantations. This served to limit access to and use of the mangrove ecosystem by the families who live in Isla Chicales.

In response to a new case of degradation of the mangrove ecosystem in their territory, caused by a sugar cane plantation owner, the community of Isla Chicales together with other local communities, with the support of the municipal government of Nueva Concepción, filed a legal complaint.

Their action drew the attention of the Ministry of Environment, the National Forests Institute (INAB) and the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP). As a result of their denunciations, the activities on the plantation responsible for the degradation of the coastal wetlands and mangrove were halted just before the sugar cane was planted. The responsible parties were required to sign a commitment which obliged them to reforest the mangrove area affected and leave a strip of land alongside the wetland where sugar cane cannot be planted. For the community of Isla Chicales, the planting of mangrove trees along a six-metre-wide strip stretching some two and a half kilometres in length, during the first half of 2013, was a major achievement. In the future, this strip of mangrove forest will also help protect the

community from possible floods.

Through this initiative, coastal communities would be contributing their knowledge on the use, management and conservation of the mangrove ecosystem, while protecting one of the country's most endangered ecosystems. In response to the significant advance of land grabbing in recent years, the Guatemalan Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Mangroves and Life (COGMANGLAR), Redmanglar Internacional and the Community Development Council (COCODE) of Isla Chicales are analyzing the possibility for local communities to access and lease public lands, since most of the coastal area of Guatemala is owned by the state (up to roughly three kilometres inland).

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