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## The struggle and resistance of mangrove communities in Latin America

In June 2013, delegates from Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, El Salvador, Honduras, Peru, Venezuela and Guatemala joined together in Monterrico, Guatemala for the 6th Meeting of the Board of Directors of Redmanglar Internacional for the Defence of Marine Coastal Territories and Community Life.

The final document of the meeting, the Monterrico Declaration, offers an assessment of the situation in the countries of Latin America. It states that the region is dominated by “a model of voracious extraction-based capitalism sustained with the complicity of governments who adapt the national and international legal framework and use their institutions and infrastructure to promote the privatization and grabbing of territories and coastal ecosystems to facilitate the execution of major investments for the extraction of minerals, wind and hydroelectric power, and the raw material needed to feed a highly consumerist system.”

The delegates expressed their opposition to “all of the practices disguised as environmentally friendly that are used to financially support this model, such as shrimp farm certification, the REDD+ programme and the carbon credits market,” because these have been implemented “to the detriment of the rights of the ancestral peoples of the mangroves, who have been plundered, displaced from their territories and stripped of their means of livelihood, placing their very survival at risk.”

The declaration denounces that the concession of traditional fishing areas to industrial aquaculture, the impunity with which commercial trawlers operate in most countries, resulting in overfishing, and the environmental damage caused to coastal areas by large-scale industrial plantations of sugar cane and oil palm all constitute “a clear process of environmental genocide of small-scale artisanal fisherfolk throughout the continent.”

### **Regional outlook**

The representatives of coastal communities provided an overview of the current situation of the mangroves in their countries.

#### *GUATEMALA*

The Guatemalan Coordinating Committee for the Defence of Mangroves and Life denounced cases of the destruction of mangroves on Guatemala’s coasts – often in full view of government authorities – and the grabbing of the territories and livelihoods of coastal communities. At the same time, it celebrated the local initiatives to defend the mangroves in the communities of Santa Odilia, Isla Chicales, San Antonio Los Encuentros, Tulate, Iztapa and Champerico.

#### *CUBA*

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The Cuban delegation highlighted the progress made in studying the threats, vulnerabilities and risks that affect coastal areas and in assessing the effects of increased sea levels in these regions. The findings of these studies are being used to improve land use planning processes in coastal areas.

## *MEXICO*

The Mexican government is promoting large-scale projects and concessions for mining, oil drilling, industrial monoculture plantations, wind farms, hydroelectric dams and mass tourism, which threaten coastal ecosystems and the territories of indigenous peoples.

The Mexican delegate at the meeting stated: “We are convinced that given the effects of climate change and the importance of mangroves for the food sovereignty of our peoples, the mangrove ecosystem should be raised to the category of a priority ecosystem for conservation. We are opposed to the reforms to the agrarian law that are aimed at facilitating privatization and the disappearance of collective land ownership through freehold land tenure.”

## *EL SALVADOR*

In their pursuit of profits, big national and transnational companies have invaded and plundered coastal territories. One example is the case of Jiquilisco Bay, in the department of Usulután, which is facing the growing concentration of land ownership and development of infrastructure projects to make way for investments in large-scale tourism, promoted through mechanisms like the Millennium Challenge Account (known in El Salvador as FOMILENIO), funded by the Millennium Challenge Corporation of the United States

## *HONDURAS*

The Honduran delegates pointed to overexploitation, the advance of monoculture plantations of crops like sugar cane, and industrial shrimp farming among the causes of the accelerated destruction of the Gulf of Fonseca and its resources.

They also called for a review of the country’s new mining law, which poses the threat of the destruction of thousands of hectares of protected natural areas and the lives of the people who live in them, and demanded the withdrawal of a legislative bill promoted by the industrial shrimp farming sector, which would allow for the transfer, mortgage and sale of concessions granted to this industry.

## *PERU*

The organizations that make up C-CONDEM in Peru demanded, among other measures, a halt to the expansion of the shrimp farming and oil industries, due to their impacts on mangroves.

Families whose livelihoods are tied to the mangroves are committed to their defence, since

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the mangroves guarantee their food security. This is why they are demanding greater participation in decision making, and the requirement of prior, free and informed consent from local communities before projects can move forward. They also called for abandoned concessions and farms to be transferred to artisanal fisherfolk, so that they can use them for responsible production that will contribute to meeting their economic needs.

## *VENEZUELA*

The Venezuelan delegation stressed that oil industry activity in marine coastal areas, port expansion, tourism development, monoculture plantations and land grabbing are causing severe impacts on mangrove ecosystems. All of this is a reflection of a mistaken development model that is leading to the displacement of artisanal fishing communities and the privatization of the people's natural heritage.

The delegates at the meeting also called on the National Assembly to consider the adoption of a law for the protection of mangrove ecosystems.

## *BRAZIL*

Traditional fishermen and fisherwomen have historically understood the importance of mangrove ecosystems for the equilibrium of species and the reinforcement of their ancestral identity. For them, fishing is more than a profession, it is a particular way of life, one that contributes to guaranteeing the food sovereignty of the Brazilian people and converts fisherfolk into the guardians of a centuries-old tradition.

In this role, they are engaged in a head-on battle against the current model of development, which is based on policies such as the privatization of waterbodies through the law on water concessions for the implementation of large-scale aquaculture, and relaxation and reform of laws to strengthen aquaculture and facilitate the expansion of large-scale projects including mining, hydroelectric dams and power plants, mass tourism, thermoelectric plants, wind farms, oil drilling, ports and shipyards.

Redmanglar Internacional supports the struggle of Brazilian fishermen and fisherwomen and calls on the competent authorities to adopt their proposal for a law on the legal recognition of fishing territories, in order to safeguard and protect their ancestral territories for this and future generations.

Finally, Redmanglar Internacional declared the need for unity and alliances with all progressive movements, revolutionary forces, entities and institutions that support struggles for the protection and recovery of mangroves and for the rights of the ancestral communities who depend on them as a symbol of life, and not a mere commodity.

On the occasion of the International Day for the Defence of Mangrove Ecosystems, July 26, and under this year's theme of "Mangroves, Food Sovereignty for Coastal Communities", Redmanglar Internacional calls on grassroots organizations in the member countries of the network as well as non-members to: "Struggle, struggle and resist, resist."

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Based on material submitted by Redmanglar Internacional. The full text of the Monterrico Declaration and the press release issued for International Mangrove Action Day are available at: <http://www.redmanglar.org>