
Honduras: Shrimp farm expansion within a Ramsar Site and protected area

Wetlands are ecosystems having a high biodiversity, temporarily or permanently flooded by fresh water, brackish water, mixed waters or sea water with a maximum depth of 6 metres. In some cases they form swamps, mud flats, peat bogs, lakes or lagoons, usually accompanied by grasses, seaweeds, mangroves or other vegetation. In some cases wetlands remain temporarily dry and devoid of vegetation and desert-like and become productive and full of life during rainy seasons.

Mangrove ecosystem included in the mudflats, lagoons, marshes, grasslands, etc., are considered wasteland by hotel and shrimp entrepreneurs and other “developers” whereby justifying their use of the land for hotels, restaurants, shrimp farms, etc., without considering the environmental, social and economic damages caused to humanity.

The Ramsar Convention is committed to safeguarding wetlands, thus recognizing the importance of their biodiversity, in addition to their function in maintaining aquifers, rehabilitating fisheries, lessening erosion, protecting against winds and storms, as a carbon and pollution trap, as a salinity regulator for groundwater and as the basis of food sovereignty.

Honduras is signatory to the International Ramsar Convention and boasts about having declared and having under conservation measures five “Ramsar Sites,” totalling 223,230 hectares of wetlands which are supposedly “under State protection.” But what is going on in a part of the “Ramsar Site” reveals that this is a false “protection.”

The tropical coastal wetlands ecosystem of Berbería, Municipality of el Triunfo, Department of Choluteca, is fed by creeks along which mangroves grow amid grasses, tropical pasture plants and other vegetation on sand flats. This ecosystem hosts a wide resident and migratory biodiversity which interrelates with the fishing communities giving them access to firewood, game, fish and recreation.

The expansion of shrimp farming in Honduras started in 1972 and in 2010 it is still expanding, with no kind of development plan. The only means of control are shrimp diseases, a drop in prices on the international markets, lower demand and sometimes, pressure from the communities. However, destruction, pollution, eviction of the communities and looting of natural resources have given rise to a social movement aimed at lessening the negative impacts. This movement has been headed by the organization CODDEFFAGOLF since 1988 and has established as its objective to get the Gulf of Fonseca Wetlands to be declared a Protected Area.

CODDEFFAGOLF submitted a proposal for Protected Area, including segments of the shrimp farms within its limits, in order to halt expansion, classifying them as “of intensive use.” In July 1999, during the International RAMSAR Convention, the Honduran shrimp farmers (ANDAH) were surprised that Honduras was able to achieve nomination of the coastal wetlands of the Gulf of Fonseca (mangroves, lagoons sand flats and other fragile ecosystems) as “Ramsar Site” allocated no. 1000 on the list of the world’s wetlands, with the consequent commitment of conserving them.

In 2000, following mass mobilization by fisher-folk and forced negotiations with the shrimp farming sector, Berbería was included among the Protected Areas of the Gulf of Fonseca. The objective would seem to have been achieved as the expectations were to halt the expansion of shrimp farming and place the rest of the wetlands under conservation measures. But a few months after promulgation of the Decree, a Spanish company known as El Faro converted over 100 hectares of wetlands in the Protected Area of La Berbería into shrimp holding ponds. Meanwhile, the EMAR I company was advancing, without an environmental license, over tens of hectares.

In 2004 the Central American Water Tribunal condemned the Government of Honduras, the El Faro, Granjas Marinas San Bernardo shrimp farms and the World Bank for pollution and destruction of the wetlands. The verdict amounts to an ethical and moral sentence and therefore does not go beyond a slight embarrassment for distracting the guilty party.

In 2005 the ANDAH shrimp farmers held up adoption of the Management Plans and it was only due to local, national and international pressure that they agreed to the submission and adoption of the Management Plans for the “Natural Protected Areas of the Southern Zone Sub-System,” which includes “la Berbería.”

Nevertheless, expansion over the wetlands continued, stimulated by high international demand for shrimps. In January 2010, the Natural Resources and Environment Secretariat (Secretaría de Recursos Naturales y Ambiente -SERNA) granted an environmental license to EMAR II to set up a shrimp farm on 169 hectares following an amazingly short licensing process lasting only five days (21-26 January). Over this short period a license was also granted to EMAR I, which had been operating for several years without an environmental license. It also took three SERNA Directorates just one day to issue favourable reports before the new governor took up office!

As if this were not enough, the EXCASUR company waited for EMAR II to establish its shrimp farm with impunity to expand over other tens of hectares, claiming to have an Environmental License obtained on 15 December 2009. What is ironical and cynical in all these cases is that the police and even the state army are protecting the shrimp farm operations, equipment and facilities. Meanwhile, the President of the Honduran Private Enterprise Council (Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada - COHEP), stated that “We need more security, because, while the peasants in Bajo Aguan try to recover their lands, in the South, (Gulf of Fonseca), they have “taken over” a shrimp farm: work cannot be done in this way because they frightens off investment...”

To demonstrate the fraud committed by government officials in confabulation with the companies, CODDEFFAGOLF decided to carry out a field assessment, observing than on a local level, on 5 March 2010, over two hundred hectares of wetlands had been added to thousands of others converted into fish farms in the Gulf of Fonseca. In la Berbería, wildlife has lost almost all its habitat and the fisher-folk have either lost or are fighting for their right to access the mangroves, their source of food and survival. They are putting direct pressure on the companies in order to obtain social compensation measures.

On a national level, disrepute of the Honduran legal system is almost total. The institutions that are responsible for working in favour of environmental conservation act as if they were subordinate to the corporate groups that recently took part in a coup d'état and that seemingly continue to be in power behind the mask of a new democracy. The Director of ANDAH, a brother of the former dictator Micheletti, managed to get agreements signed between ANDAH and government institutions together with other arrangements that attack natural resources, conventions and agreements still in force with the new government.

On an international level, the Ramsar Convention would seem to ignore the situation, which is not exclusive to Honduras. Even if they knew about it, their limited power would only enable them to advise the Honduran government on the introduction of ways to improve their behaviour. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and the Dutch Oxfam Novib in addition to the World Wildlife Fund-USA (WWF-USA), among other international NGOs, have changed their interest in conservation and are now into the business of certifying shrimp and other aquiculture species' farming.

La Berbería is just a tiny example of what is going on in the tropical zones of the planet where the addition of impacts is contributing inter alia, to climate change, to the destruction of biological diversity and to the loss of food sovereignty.

While the insatiable demand for shrimp continues in Europe, Japan, the United States and Australia, wetland ecosystems continue to disappear. Does it matter?

Article excerpted and adapted from: "Consumismo en países desarrollados causa destrucción de Humedales en el trópico"(Consumerism in developed countries causes destruction of Wetlands in the tropics), Jorge Varela Márquez, CODDEFFAGOLF, March 2010. The complete document with photos can be found in:<http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Honduras/Consumismo.pdf>