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## Ecuador: Memory and future emerge from women's struggle for their mangroves

The Muisne canton, province of Esmeraldas hosted the “First Meeting: Women of the Mangrove Ecosystem of Ecuador, our dreams, our rights, our challenges,” held in May this year.

Over 80 women shared this meeting, in which they told their stories as women who are facing discrimination and violence. Members of REDMANGLAR International came from Colombia, Honduras, Mexico and Brazil to reconstruct the historical memory of women who have always lived in mangroves.

Fisherwomen, shell, crab, oyster and clam gatherers, women companions of the mangrove in their work, in their struggle to survive, reflected on where they come from and where they are going. They portrayed their stories and mangrove biodiversity, they portrayed their families working and playing in the mangroves. They also portrayed destruction and deforestation. They portrayed the way they wanted life to be in the future. They talked, made more friends, started finding other women like themselves and finding themselves.

They said that mangroves are the natural industry that gives them everything and that when the ecosystem is lost, life is lost. “I am sure that when León Febres Cordero was president they started felling the mangrove. Then along came the shrimp farmers to destroy the mangrove. Any President taking up office supports the shrimp farmers and forgets the poor,” complained one of the participants.

### **The memory**

Each one drew her story. The women from the province of Esmeraldas depicted themselves with a cigarette in their mouth; they smoke to keep the mosquitoes away when they are gathering shells from the mangroves. They depicted themselves in the midst of the exuberant mangrove ecosystem, but also in the midst of the devastation caused by industrial shrimp aquiculture. They said that there are hardly any shellfish left and that although they take great care of the ecosystem, much more has to be done, that they reforested together with their companions from other organizations, with students, voluntary workers and that they knocked down the walls of the shrimp ponds that came to invade and to destroy everything.

In the province of Manabi the struggling women from the mangroves come from two areas, the estuary of the Portoviejo River and the estuary of the Chone River. With the arrival of the shrimp farms the mangrove was lost. “We were fisherwomen; we also did short cycle farming. When the shrimp farms arrived we helped collect larvae for the laboratories and soon everything came to an end. Now we have no work, some of us are employed removing the heads off shrimps in the ponds, but it is hard work, they pay little and it is not a permanent job.”

They remembered that previously the El Niño phenomenon had been a blessing because it was accompanied by abundant fishing and the land was renewed. “Since the loss of the mangroves, each

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El Niño phenomenon is a disaster arriving in our communities, everything is flooded, houses are lost and people have to leave their territory,” they lamented.

In Guayas there is still a great diversity of fish, shrimps and shellfish, there is still a considerable extension of mangroves protected by the communities. But there are locations such as Puna Island, where the shrimp farmers have finished off the mangrove and many shell and shrimp gatherers no longer have any work or anywhere to get food from.

The mangroves have been almost completely wiped out in the province of Santa Elena, but it has coral reefs and fish banks that supply fisheries exuberantly. However, these resources must be protected as industrial fishing is depleting them and, because mangroves (the fishes’ “nursery”) no longer exist, this wealth will soon disappear.

## **The struggle**

“We have been threatened, we have been attacked, the shrimp farmers have shot at us and they have thrown us out like dogs in order to take the mangrove away from us and to keep this heritage of ours. But here we are willing to give our lives if necessary because we were born here, this is where our history is, our stories, our work, our food, our families and friends,” stated the women from Esmeraldas.

And the women sang:

*I wish the president could hear me out  
What I want to say to him now  
Listen Mr. President, have a little pity  
The mangroves are ours, they do not belong to the authority*

*Ay, until when and until when  
Please until when  
Until when will they harm  
The poor people of Ecuador*

In the words of the women of Manabi “our dream is to see the result of our efforts and to recover the lost territory. To end the marches, win this struggle and enjoy what we have and what we recover.”

## **The future**

These women’s dream is for the shellfish to come back. For those 1,000 or 1,500 that existed some twenty years ago to exist again today. They want to return to work gathering shellfish, gathering crabs. They dream that many species that can be used to feed themselves return, that the men continue to be “mangleros” making charcoal, making houses out of mangrove timber; that the mangroves return to their previous state and their lives too.

It is also true that all is not a bed of roses, that life in the mangroves is hard. “With my work as a shellfish gatherer I have given my children the possibility to study, so that they are not what I am, so they are something better. I feel proud of my children, I have given them progress. I didn’t leave them like I was left, as my mother didn’t give me any learning,” says Jacinta, the delegate of the Muisne canton, province of Esmeraldas and this consideration triggered off a heated discussion among the participants.

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This is “because we are discriminated against, we are scornfully treated as “cholas” (half-breeds), because our work is not valued. A woman who goes to the mangrove is not respected like one who has a university profession and that is why we think our children must study to be respected and not discriminated against. Because society is like that, it does not understand how marvellous the mangroves are or that we give them their food with our work. It is not us who despise and renounce our mangroves, it is the country’s president, those in power, those who destroy, that do not understand,” reflected the women from the province of El Oro. “We want to raise our voices to be heard and have each of our ideals respected. To preserve what is ours and what enables the work of us women and men to cover our families’ economy. We want to be admired for the effort we make to defend our territory and for discrimination to end so that our children can inherit the mangroves and feel proud of being from the mangroves. We dream that the violence in our communities ends, that they let us walk and run in our mangroves, working with dignity,” they affirmed.

“My dream of the mangrove is to sow it and cultivate it for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren to produce and to tell the same story I am telling you now. For them to be part of the mangroves as I am now a part,” stated Rosa, a crab-gatherer aged 52, who has taught all her generation to earn their living gathering crabs in the mangroves and loving them.

The meeting ended with an affirmation of life. On fifty hectares of mangroves illegally occupied and destroyed by Mr. Ilario Patiño with shrimp ponds, the women reforested two hectares of mangroves in the location of Casa Vieja, in the parish of Bolívar.

The Minister of the Environment has been requested to proceed to register this area and it is hoped that on this occasion, the reforestation carried out by the women will be guaranteed and that the area can live again.

Based on the account of the meeting, sent by C-CONDEM - Corporación Coordinadora Nacional para la Defensa del Ecosistema Manglar, [manglares@ccondem.org.ec](mailto:manglares@ccondem.org.ec), [www.ccondem.org.ec](http://www.ccondem.org.ec)