
Ecuador: Government will hand over mangroves belonging to the Ecuadorian people to the shrimp farming industry

On 15 October, the President of the Republic, the Economist Rafael Correa Delgado, and four Ministers of State issued Decree 1391 regulating industrial shrimp farming.

The Decree is contradictory, because on the one hand it recognizes the illegal situation in which thousands of hectares of shrimp farms have been operating, together with the felling of mangroves resulting from this industry. But on the other hand it ends up by rewarding the shrimp farming industry by granting it concessions in areas that are a National Asset of Public Use (see http://www.ccondem.org.ec/imagesFTP/6940.DECRETO_1391_10_2008_1_.pdf), thus violating 56 legal provisions that have protected the mangrove ecosystems since the seventies.

The measure of “regulating” illegal actions (which in practice will be legalized) sets a precedent of legal insecurity regarding environmental issues and regarding guaranteeing the Economic, Social, Cultural and Environmental Rights of the Ancestral Fisher-folk and Artisanal Gatherer Peoples of the Ecuadorian coast, who have been violently displaced from their territories and who have insistently requested the various Governments in office to give back the mangrove ecosystem areas occupied with impunity by the shrimp farming industry.

Will Ecuadorian mangroves fall into private hands?

The mangrove ecosystem is one of the five most productive ecosystems in the world. Alarmed by its destruction, Official Records No. 722 of 6 July 1987 declared as protective forests 362.802 hectares of land covered by mangroves, other forest species and saline areas located in 5 hydrographic systems on the Ecuadorian coast.

A study made by the Centre for Integrated Surveying of Natural Resources by Remote Sensing (CLIRSEN) in the year 2000 reveals that 254,503 hectares had been felled, the equivalent of 70% of the original mangrove areas. Furthermore, the Third Agricultural and Livestock Census of 2001, showed the existence of 234.359 hectares of shrimp farms.

Traditionally, Ecuadorian legislation has prohibited mangrove felling, burning or destruction. It penalises mangrove destruction by levying fines, ordering restitution of the entire area destroyed and even by prison sentences.

However, the recent Decree 1391, completely demolishes current legislation, in an attempt to reward shrimp farm industrialists that have destroyed mangroves and with them, deprived the local communities of their source of sustenance and livelihood, consenting to the reforestation of a minimum percentage of the area destroyed, absolving the industry from paying fines and from criminal penalties.

Decree 1391 not only violates Laws and Codes, but above all the Constitutional text, approved by the majority of the Ecuadorian people on 28 September 2008. The new Constitution, applauded at

international level because it sets out a progressive constitutional text, establishes a series of Nature rights, Water rights and rights of the People, that have been violated by this Decree.

And what if mangroves were to become extinct?

The Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem live in an intimate relationship with their natural ecosystem which is their source of sustenance and life. The ecosystem not only benefits local communities but fulfils essential ecological functions for the planet. The terrible scenes of the Asian tsunami (December 2006) should be remembered when, after felling the natural protective barrier and windbreak curtain formed by mangroves, entire villages were wiped out and thousands of people killed or seriously injured, not to mention the enormous damage done to material goods.

Mangroves are also important in desalinization of waters entering the continent, enabling land to be used for agriculture and therefore for food production which, together with fish and shellfish – that shelter among the mangrove roots during spawning and the larval stage – are our population's main source of food.

Our food sovereignty would be seriously affected by the privatization of our coasts and their handing over to the shrimp industry, because the fantastic crustacean it produces is solely aimed at feeding the North, given that farmed shrimps are not consumed in the producer countries: they are export goods.

Standing mangrove ecosystems feed our population and generate decent jobs for local communities who day by day have seen the fish, crab and shellfish banks decrease. Their natural habitat is disappearing at the speed of the mechanical arm of a digger that in just a few days transforms a rich and lush thousand-year old mangrove into a shrimp pond.

The ancestral peoples of the mangrove ecosystems demand the abolition of Decree 1391 and penalization of the shrimp farm industry that has usurped mangroves, a fact that has been recognized in this same Decree. This demand is set out in the Manifesto of the Ancestral Peoples of the Mangrove Ecosystem against the Regulation and Certification of the Captive Shrimp Industry.

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