

Ecuador: Shrimp farming impacts on a mangrove reserve

The Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Mangrove Reserve in the Province of Esmeraldas covers an area of 51,300 hectares and within it is the Majagual mangrove covering 28,367 hectares. The mangrove is the habitat of crustacean species including oysters, blue crabs and shrimps and of tree species such as the red, black, white and jelí mangroves.

During the 1950's the Majagual mangrove had been depredated by loggers who extracted tannin from mangrove bark to use it in the leather industry. Later logging was banned and finally, on 26 October 1995, it became a protected reserve, recognized as having the tallest mangroves in the world (averaging 50 metres tall).

However, within the Reserve the existence of two big shrimp farms, El Rosario and Puro Congo has been allowed. The development of industrial shrimp farming is often promoted by governments that are indebted and under pressure from international financial institutions, as a way of increasing exports and enabling hard currency to enter the country. But the facts always show that this accounting does not work in the same way for local economies (See WRM Bulletin No 51).

Installed in 1993, the shrimp company Puro Congo S.A., owned by Colombian citizen Carlos Acosta, built concrete walls on the beach and illegally opened up artificial channels 30 metres wide and two metres high to provide water to the ponds. The shrimp farm's effluents are illegally released into the El Aguacate, Guachalá and Majagual marshes and into the Cayapas River, causing the disappearance of over 20 native and migratory species from the zone, and a drop of at least 70 percent in the marine-coastal resources of the sector.

The community organization Association of Artisan Fisher-people and Trading of Bio-Aquatic Products Manglares del Norte (Asociación de Pescadores Artesanales y de Comercialización de Productos Bio-Acuáticos Manglares del Norte - APACOBIMN) has repeatedly complained about the destruction of the mangrove, contamination and salinization of ground and surface water in the Laguna de la Ciudad wetland and of the wells belonging to neighbouring communities due to the shrimp farm's activities, and its impacts on the fauna, as millions of fish have been poisoned and green iguanas, native and migratory birds and terrestrial and aquatic mammals have been depleted. However, in spite of the constant complaints, the Puro Congo Company now intends to extend over 300 hectares in the Laguna de la Ciudad wetland, in the Majagual and obtain a ten-year concession for the area.

The national environmental authorities verified the complaints and recommended that the Ministry should order the closure of the channels and that those responsible for the damage should cover the cost of restoring the wetlands and the corresponding compensation. However the Ministry has not adopted any measure in this respect.

For its part, the National Coordinating Office for the Defence of the Mangrove Ecosystem (Coordinadora Nacional para la Defensa del Ecosistema Manglar - C-CONDEM) denounced that in reprisal for the complaints made, various farms in the neighbouring communities had suffered

damages. Together with APACOBIMN, C-CONDEM is demanding that the extension of the concession requested by the shrimp company should not be authorized.

The two tallest mangrove trees in the world –two colossuses from the Majagual mangrove, of the Rhizophora variety (red mangrove) measuring 65 and 63.8 metres– have fallen, one nine months ago and the other four months ago. Although the version that they had died of “old age” was considered, C-CONDEM denounced that the progressive erosion of marshes and beaches –as they impound enormous masses of water to serve the shrimp ponds, acting as drains for the 630 hectare shrimp farm– is the true cause of the death of these two unique samples.

Article based on information from: “Manglares más altos del mundo no mueren de viejos, los mata la camaronera Puro Congo”, C-CONDEM, Boletín de prensa, 13-02-2006, e-mail: manglares@ccondem.org.ec; “Luto por los manglares más altos del mundo”, Manuel Toro, January 22, 2006, both articles were distributed by Red Manglar Internacional, Electronic Bulletin No. 28.