
Bangladesh: Mangrove forests, far more generous than the shrimp industry

Mangroves, the coastal equivalent of tropical forests on land, and also called "salt water forests", have provided livelihood for a lot of local people (see WRM Bulletin N° 51). The Sundarbans, the world's largest coastal mangrove forest, stretches for almost 6,000 square miles across India and Bangladesh, a natural barrier against tsunamis and frequent cyclones that blow in from the Bay of Bengal. With roots that tolerate salt water, the forest's mangrove trees grow 70 feet or more above islands of layered sand and gray clay, deposited by rivers that flow more than a thousand miles from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal.

Over the last 20 years, shrimp and tiger prawn exporters have taken over thousands of rice paddies and other farms and flooded them with salt water to raise the crustaceans.

Squeezed between the jungle and thousands of expanding shrimp and tiger prawn farms, at least 100,000 villagers in Bangladesh risk Bengal tiger attacks to fish, cut trees and gather honey in the Sundarbans forest. "For thousands of families who refuse to leave, the only choice left is the hazardous work of gathering honey, fishing or cutting trees in the mangrove forest", said Abdul Haque, a teacher at a village in Gabura island, which lies in a region with one of Bangladesh's heaviest concentrations of shrimp and tiger prawn farms, extending almost 50 miles inland.

"By leasing out our land to the rich shrimp businessmen, we have been the worst victims," he said. "They give us a one-shot payment for the land, and we spend it fast." "Now, when everything is said and done, we are not able to grow any vegetables or trees here. There's no doubt that people are scared to go into the jungle. But when they start going hungry, they are forced to."

Many villagers enter the forest to cut trees for fishing boats or to supply factories that make hardboard for furniture and buildings, and additional wood products. Honey hunters often have the most risky job, searching for bees' nests in vegetation so dense that the only way through is on hands and knees. Each spring, the honey hunters go deeply into debt to rent boats for their journey through a vast warren of muddy saltwater rivers and channels that meander around thousands of jungle islands. They have to stock up on food and supplies for trips that last up to three months. And they have to grease the palms of corrupt forestry officials.

Thrust into the deep mangrove forest by shrimp farming, village honey hunters have to struggle for the liquid gold, closely preserved by forest animals like pythons, king cobras, crocodiles and the man-eating Bengal tigers. However, the mangrove forest is far more generous than the shrimp industry...

Article based on information from: "The Lure of Liquid Gold", Paul Watson, Los Angeles Times, disseminated by Mangrove Action Project (MAP), http://www.earthisland.org/map/ltfrn_166.htm

