
Bangladesh: Sunderban Biodiversity Conservation Project questioned

The SBCP Watch Group is an environmental group of four local NGOs --Actionaid Bangladesh, Rupantar, JJS and Lokaj-- established in 2000 with the purpose of monitoring the activities carried out by the so-called Sunderban Biodiversity Conservation Project (SBCP). This 77.5 million dollar project is funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Global Environment Facility (GEF) and the Nordic Development Fund (see WRM Bulletin 44), allegedly to restore the original ecosystem of the largest single block of mangroves that exists in the world today (see WRM Bulletin 44).

The citizen's group believes that the project will lead to a negative outcome if it is not reviewed in earnest. The SBCP has failed to identify the root causes of poverty and destruction of the biodiversity of the Sunderban and has on the contrary blamed the common local people. Eradication of poverty of the people living in the "Impact Zone" or "Buffer Zone" adjacent to the forest is one of the components of the project. However, according to the citizen's group, the project has been designed mainly without consulting the people living there. It has not taken into account the industrial shrimp cultivation carried out in the area adjacent to the Sunderban, which the Watch Group labels as "a new curse for the people" inhabiting that area. Shrimp aquaculture has displaced traditional occupations of share-croppers, agricultural labourers, small and marginal farmers, fisherfolk and others who have been forced out by shrimp farmers on to the forest in search of an alternative source of livelihood, thus increasing pressure on the steadily depleting resources of the ecosystem.

In a survey conducted by NGOs, it has been found that shrimp fry collection is the only occupation that is carried on in the Sunderban throughout the year. As long as all sources of employment have become closed, large numbers of the affected people have been constrained to turn to collection of shrimp fry, crab and shell, in a way that even the same collectors find unsustainable. Local people believe that if the government prohibits shrimp aquaculture in the region, the poor and marginal farmers will be benefited and a lot of employment opportunities will be created in agriculture and related activities, producing crops and local varieties of fish to meet local requirements. Shrimp aquaculture has long been opposed by a movement of local people and has taken the toll of Koronamoyee Sardar, a symbol of the struggle for land rights and against shrimp farming among the landless people in Bangladesh (see WRM Bulletin 51).

According to the NGO survey, shrimp aquaculture is also responsible for many other impacts. As a result of decrease in the availability of rice straw for thatching, resulting from the decrease in agriculture, wild hay from the Sunderbans is being over-exploited. The increase in salinity of the region has killed off all vegetation, resulting in acute shortage of fuel wood, for which also pressure has increased on the resources of the Sunderbans. The reduction in the number of cattle has also reduced the availability of cow-dung which is used as an alternative to fire-wood.

The Watch Group has put forth a set of recommendations to the ADB for an immediate review of the activities and the design of the SBCP, based on some genuine concerns and principles and to make the review report public. It also said that the rights of the poor people to the common natural resources must be recognised; a ban should be imposed on the oil and gas exploration in the area of Block 5 and 7 (see WRM Bulletin 15 and 44). The group's suggestions also include responsive

shrimp farming, instead of a commercial one; adoption and implementation of policies in relation to eco-friendly land use ownership and management and a broad participatory project monitoring process.

The protection and development of the Sunderban Reserve Forest will be possible only when the people are actively involved with the project from the very start and when the environment and the interests of the local population get priority over large-scale commercial ventures.

Article based on information from: "Citizen's Forum for Conserving the Biodiversity of the Sunderban Reserve Forest", <http://www.cdp.20m.com/sundorbon.html> ; Holiday Publication, <http://www.weeklyholiday.net/060902/count.html>