
Guatemala: Champerico fisherfolk win over shrimp farm firm Camarsa

The community of Champerico --localized in Retalhuleu, at the Pacific Ocean coast of Guatemala-- has been fighting in defence of their livelihoods since 1995, when the shrimp farming firm Camarones S.A. (Camarsa) and its subsidiary Pesca S.A. built a fence to prevent public access to the wetlands.

Champerico is a port, being fish the main traditional diet of the local people. Thus, the fisherfolk have seen their traditional fishing grounds threatened by the intrusive moves of the company which has also polluted the estuaries, logged mangroves (activity prohibited by the Environmental Law) to build industrial shrimp ponds, provoked the death of hundreds of fish as a result of its activities, and repressed and intimidated fisherfolk.

The community's struggle gained momentum in May and June 2001, when the people joined to resist the bullying shrimp company. The social response took a sad toll of two young men killed --14-year-old Moytin Castellanos and 22-year-old Fernando Chiyoc Albizures (see WRM bulletin 46 and 48). A Commission for resolution of conflicts was established and started negotiations. After this incident the North American Mike Corser, engineer and manager in charge of CAMARSA in the moment of the protest, was arrested, along with nine guards of the company, accused of homicide.

Now it seems that the struggle has borne fruit. Intimidation has ceased and security guards wear uniforms, so they can now be clearly identified. Additionally, the company has also removed the fences. On January 18, a commission including Greenpeace International representative Elmer López, as well as representatives from the Neighbours' Association for the Integral Development of Champerico (Asociación de Vecinos para el Desarrollo Integral de Champerico), the NGO Trópico Verde, some local fisherfolk and staff from CAMARSA, went to the site to witness that the fences were withdrawn. The firm has also committed to the reforestation of 45 hectares of mangroves along the coast, which it had logged along the years.

The community feels comforted with these perceived successes and the world should acknowledge and praise the endurance and resilience of anonymous people who have successfully challenged power with a struggle backed internationally by committed NGOs.