
Honduras: Shrimp farming destruction

The waters of the Pacific Ocean penetrate the territory of Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador through a 35 km entry, forming a water mass of 3,200 kms² known as the Gulf of Fonseca, with a 261 km coastline.

Different types of wetlands are to be found along the coast, such as mangroves, periodically irrigated by the tides. A forest inventory made in 1987, showed that in the Honduran sector of the Gulf, there were 47,000 hectares of mangroves that year.

At the beginning of 1973, the shrimp industry was launched in the Gulf wetlands, within a system of semi-intensive cultivation, with a density of between 10 and 30 post-larvae per square metre, including fertilisation in laboratories and harvesting in ponds.

This “closed cycle” reproduction system did not last many years. It was substituted by the capture of wild shrimp post-larvae in the wetlands and marshes. In 1995, 3,000 people, mainly children were involved in collecting post-larvae for shrimp farms. However the supply was not enough to cover the increasing demand for post-larvae and nurseries were established to satisfy it.

It was thus that shrimp farming started, a private undertaking that had the financial support of the International Development Agency (USAID), the World Bank and the Government of Honduras. The shrimp “boom” had started.

Between 1973 and 1989, the industry grew very quickly. However, in 1989, only 5 million pounds of shrimps were exported, instead of the 9 million pounds expected, coinciding with the appearance of the “Seagull Syndrome” which struck down the shrimps. Between 1990 and 1995, industrial exploitation rose to 12,000 hectares, but exports descended --from 20 million pounds in 1993 to 15 million in 1995-- attributed to the “Taura virus.” In 1998, expansion reached 16,000 hectares but exports continued at 15 million pounds.

In 1999, the “white spot virus,” coming from Asia appeared in the Gulf, causing havoc to shrimp production. Between 1999 and 2000, thousands of hectares of shrimp farms were abandoned, various shrimp packing plants closed down and unemployment was rampant. Nearly all the small fish farms closed down their operations and were on the verge of losing their goods due to their debts with the banks. However the large shrimp companies saved their situation thanks to multimillion dollar loans from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, among others.

The diseases imported by aquaculture not only had an impact on industrial shrimp breeding, but have also severely affected biological diversity and marine fisheries. Additionally, the loss of habitats for native and migratory bird species has been significant and has also harmed other species of fauna.

The catches of shrimp post-larvae to satisfy the billionaire requirements of fattening-up farms together with other species of by-catch, killed following selection by means of chemical products that do not harm shrimps but kill the other species (9 by-catch for each shrimp post-larva caught) also has

serious impacts. Industrial demand may well be above 4 billion post-larvae, therefore the number of other species killed could be over 36 billion!

Additionally, the waste from the packing plants is dumped directly into the marshes where the accelerated fermentation processes cause the death of stocks of numerous species. Other wastes are dumped directly on the borders of highways or in fields, causing air contamination.

In various sites, the installation of shrimp farms has implied the prohibition to enter mangroves, lagoons, estuaries and the Gulf. For the local populations, this implies a loss of access to their traditional sources of food, firewood and income, obliging them to “illegally” enter such areas, evading controls established by the companies. The result has been that between October 1992 and May 1998, nine fishers were found shot dead in the mangroves and estuaries near the shrimp farms. Their death has been related to shrimp farm surveillance.

In spite of public demonstrations in protest, of numerous complaints to the respective authorities and to the national press, these murders have never even been investigated and have remained unpunished.

The question generated among the fishers is “we have been evicted from the mountains, we have been evicted from the valleys, and now, if we are evicted from the coasts and the sea, where will we go?