Ecuador: Mangroves and shrimp farming companies

Over 30 years ago, the destruction of mangroves was started in order to build ponds in beaches and bays. According to data from the former INEFAN and the National Aquaculture Chamber, in January 2000 there were 207,000 hectares or 170,000 hectares respectively of shrimp ponds, of which 50,454 hectares were operating legally. The rest are illegal. In the province of Esmeraldas, where the best conserved and tallest mangroves in the world are to be found, over 90% of the ponds installed there are illegal. Official information from CLIRSEN shows that in 1984, there were 89,368 hectares of shrimp ponds, indicating that the expansion of shrimp breeding over 16 years increased by 117,631 hectares.

The shrimp companies not only benefit from the Ecuadorian's natural heritage, but also from the weakness of their official policy. In June 1985, the government declared the conservation of mangroves to be of public interest. In September that same year, the Under-Secretariat for Fisheries suspended the granting of licences to carry out fish-farming in mangrove regions. In November 1986, the Government declared 362,742 hectares of mangroves and saline pampas to be protected forests. But legal regulations have no weight as in the period between 1984 and 1999 more mangroves were lost and more shrimp ponds were established than at any other time.

During this period of mangrove depredation, thousands of families that traditionally had depended on this ecosystem have been affected by the loss of their culture and of the environment that made their social and economic reproduction possible. For over 30 years now there has been impunity and violation of the laws in force in the country.

Over the past two years, the shrimp industry has complained about the problems affecting this activity, blaming all its economic ills on the White Spot virus for the reduction in shrimp production. What is not said and what is not recognised is the irresponsible way of acting to favour the shrimp companies getting richer, and provoking the destruction of mangroves.

Today the shrimp companies are getting ready to make another assault on nature with the installation of shrimp ponds on the high lands, which would cause salinity of agricultural lands and fresh water. If this undertaking is permitted, in a very short while Ecuador will be facing environmental disasters, such as the loss of agricultural lands due to soil salinity, the contamination of surface and groundwater, changes in the physical, chemical and microbiological structure of the soil, loss of terrestrial and aquatic biodiversity, in the name of salvaging the shrimp sector.

The national press, farmers, higher educational centres, local authorities, peasants and citizens from various sectors have voiced their protest and rejection of this activity which goes against the environment and have claimed the farmers' legitimate right to maintain their activities without the competition and prejudice caused by the shrimp companies.

Attention should also be drawn to the social impact that would be generated by competition between fish-farmers and agricultural farmers, together with problems in the use of water for human consumption and agriculture. Privileging economic issues, aimed at satisfying the demand of

developed countries, over the production of food for the consumption of the Ecuadorian people, is equal to an attack on national food sovereignty.

The United States is the greatest consumer in the world. Shrimp consumption rose from 0,2 pounds per person to over 3 pounds in 1999 and has been constantly increasing since 1996, when the annual average was 2,50 pounds.

Regarding impacts on health, Greenpeace Austria, together with Greenpeace Germany sent the mass media a publication denouncing the effects of antibiotics applied to shrimps and particularly that of Chloramphenicol that, independently from its concentration, may cause strong effects, even causing death.

In showing up the various elements involved in aquaculture, an abominable picture of this activity appears:

- Destruction of mangroves to build ponds in beaches and bays
- Shrimp industry ponds operating illegally
- Thirty years of impunity and of violation of the laws in force in the country
- Installation of shrimp ponds in high lands
- At attack on the food sovereignty of the peoples
- Impacts on consumer health

In this context, the Ecuadorian environmental organisation, Acción Ecológica is promoting the non-consumption of shrimps produced in captivity in tropical countries as a way of protecting actively and in solidarity, mangroves and the peoples that depend on them.