Thailand: Uncertain future for the world Nº 1 exporter?

Thailand has been the world's No. 1 producer and exporter of farmed shrimp for a number of years, with the shrimp boom starting in the early 1980's. The country's total shrimp output reached 300,000 tonnes last year, higher than the annual average of 200,000 to 250,000 tonnes, thanks to a supply shortage in the world market. Despite this, during 2001, shrimp farmer and exporter associations have asked the government to speedily implement a national policy encouraging shrimp farming to prepare for tougher export competition from neighbouring countries. India and Bangladesh together produce 60,000 to 80,000 tonnes; Indonesia 60,000 to 80,000 tonnes; Vietnam 50,000 to 70,000 tonnes; the Philippines 30,000 tonnes; and Malaysia 10,000 tonnes. According to shrimp exporters, due to government support and new policies, these countries now had greater potential to increase capacity and Thailand could be pushed out of the export market if a national policy to boost the sector was not developed.

The shrimp exporters are clearly vocal about the need to further support the shrimp industry, but they are mute concerning the tremendous environmental and social impacts of the industry. According to the Thai National Economic and Social Development Board, about 253,000ha of the country's 380,000ha of mangrove forests have been destroyed by shrimp farms. In several coastal provinces, many of these farms were located close to paddy fields, which have been impacted by saltwater contamination. The livelihood of farmers and fishermen communities close to shrimp farming areas have been very badly affected. Due to self-pollution, virus attacks and land degradation, many ponds along the coast have been abandoned and the industry has moved on to other areas, leaving behind large tracts of wasteland.

One of the targeted areas in recent years has been the inland rice bowl of the country in the central plains. This move generated heated opposition by rice farmers, NGOs and academics to the point that the government instituted a ban on inland farming of black tiger prawns two years ago. Due to the insatiable nature of the shrimp industry, the ban came under heavy attack during the year 2001 and there were strong rumours that the ban would soon be lifted. But due to pressure from civil society groups and academics, and advice from a sub-committee, the National Environment Board eventually decided to let the ban stand and urged promotion of environmentally-friendly and sustainable shrimp cultivation. Latest news report that inland prawn farmers in rice growing provinces would switch to a less profitable but more environmentally-friendly freshwater prawn known as koong kam kram (a freshwater prawn). Meanwhile, a policy prohibiting the cutting of mangroves and promoting the rehabilitation and reforestation of abandoned ponds has yet to be developed.

Local people have had a difficult time to voice opposition to the expansion of shrimp farming, as the police, the army and the justice system generally stand in support of those with money and political connections. In this state of affairs, the shrimp investors feel free to do what they like, sometimes going far beyond what is acceptable. In January 2001, Mr Jurin Rachapol, 49, a conservationist and advocate of community forestry in Phuket was assassinated while harvesting nuts on his farm. His family and friends believe that Jurin's activism against shrimp farming and destructive fishing gear was the reason he was gunned down. Even the Bangkok Post published strong articles on this subject casting the conflict as one of conservation and wise use and

management against, in the words of newspaper, "over-exploitation of natural resources" and "greed" of shrimp farmers.

The end of 2001, however, is not bringing good news to the shrimp industry. With forty-eight per cent of Thailand's shrimp exports going to the US, the industry will have to try new markets given the decline in US shrimp imports after the September 11 attacks. Latest news also report that Thai prawn farmers warned of contamination derived from improper cultivation that have resulted in products laced with anti-biotic substances that may be banned in European countries.