
Philippines: Shrimp Farming and Mangrove Decline

In the 1980s, shrimp farming became an industry when commercial availability of new technology from Taiwan, along with attractive export prices, led to the Shrimp Fever that swept the country and the rest of Asia. Filipino farmers shifted from milkfish (*Chanos chanos*) to shrimp, as well as intensified their culture systems from traditional and extensive to higher stocking densities.

Rising domestic prices and consumption of shrimp, moreover, encouraged many sugarcane planters in Negros Occidental to convert to the monoculture of black tiger prawn (*Penaeus monodon*), setting up expensive aquaculture facilities and boosting Philippine shrimp production in the process. An increase in foreign aid for aquaculture development, coupled with reforms in Philippines' investments policies initiated under the Aquino administration in the late 80s, provided further support to the nascent shrimp industry resulting in an impressive and steady rise in production until the mid-90s.

However, the widespread outbreak of luminous bacteria in the Western Visayas --largely the result of poor farming and environmental practices-- led to a spectacular collapse in shrimp production, particularly in Negros Occidental. By 1996, it was estimated that only one of ten shrimp farms in this province --once the center of intensive shrimp culture in the country-- was operating.

Primavera, in "Development and Conservation of Philippine Mangroves: Institutional Issues" (1998), discussed the "intertwined histories of Philippine mangroves and aquaculture ponds", singling out the decline of mangrove ecosystems and the loss in goods and services derived from same resources, as one of the major impacts of shrimp farming.

She likewise pointed out the correlation between fish production and shrimp and mangrove areas: over the years, as mangrove areas declined, so did production from fish caught nearshore; in contrast, brackishwater pond area increased, as did the aquaculture sector's contribution to total Philippine fish production.

Moreover, "national policy encouraging brackishwater pond culture has been premised on the belief that mangroves and other wetlands are wastelands", Primavera added.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquaculture Resources (BFAR) --the lead agency tasked to ensure the protection and management of inland and marine resources-- insists that its new thrust, the Aquaculture for Rural Development (ARD) program, departs sharply from the old paradigm that focused too much on technology and production.

However, despite its claims of being "mass-based with emphasis on simple environment-friendly technology" and geared towards solving "the perennial problem of poverty in the countryside", it appears that the ARD is still the same dog given a new collar: it aims to increase aquaculture production through such schemes as the establishment of mariculture parks, and "conversion of wastelands", such as "sand dune areas, lahar lands, sunken/flooded areas, mountainous areas, (and) marshlands/swamplands" into more "productive aquaculture areas".

With its history of favoring big business over small fisherfolk, combined with weak and vague national fisheries policies that obfuscate rather than enlighten, BFAR is inexorably paving the way for a repeat of the social and environmental mistakes of the Blue Revolution in the 70s, when some 200,000 hectares of mangroves were converted to fishponds --all in the name of so-called 'development' and 'progress'.