
Malaysia: Each prawn produced represents a teardrop

The shrimp industry in Malaysia has developed rapidly since the early 1980s after the so-called successes experienced in neighbouring Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines. Malaysia, however, is not one of the major producers of cultured marine prawn in the world, as the area under marine prawn culture is about 5,100 hectares (2,627 hectares in 1995). Despite this, the Government of Malaysia is very proud to claim that the country's average production (metric tonnes per hectare) is the third highest in the world, after Taiwan and Thailand. And plans for intensification and expansion have been drawn up.

Based on the Food Production Action Plan (Fisheries Sector) that was formulated by the Fisheries Department, forecasted production of marine prawn (White Prawn, *Penaeus penicillatus* and Tiger Prawn, *Penaeus monodon*) in the year 2010 will be 129,100 metric tonnes. This amounts to a jump in production by about 13 times from the 1998 level of 9,835 metric tonnes.

In the early 1990's, the government identified 110,000 hectares of mangrove forest suitable for tiger prawn rearing and allocated RM15.38million for aquaculture development in the Sixth Malaysia Plan. State governments and related agencies were quick to alienate very valuable mangrove and peat swamp forests for this ecologically destructive activity and had even acquired very productive paddy lands for this purpose. Little thought had been spared for the impact of such destruction would have on the environment and the communities who depend on mangroves for their livelihood. The major environmental impacts resulting from shrimp farming have been mangrove loss, water pollution and fisheries decline in coastal waters.

Mangroves form only about 3% (some 650,000ha) of the total land area in Malaysia. Most of the ponds opened during the 1980's and early 1990's involved the clearcutting of mangroves. Local fisherfolk are severely concerned about the increased loss of mangroves as this has led to decrease in wild stocks and extinction of several commercial fish species in some places. The Penang Inshore Fishermen Welfare Association states that its survey revealed that 34 species of fish have become extinct and another 50 or more are becoming rare in the waters off Penang.

The destruction of coastal mangroves has also brought about coastal erosion. The coastal villages are susceptible to critical erosion, battered by strong waves and storms. Their life and property is at stake as the raging sea is slowly swallowing the coast. Some ponds have been abandoned due to the erosion, acid sulphate soil conditions and occasional mass mortality of prawns due to disease outbreaks. The culturists do not make any effort to rehabilitate the degraded mangroves and again the coastal communities are victims of such development.

Although prawn farming is still a small industry in Malaysia, the social impacts have already become evident. Among the most worrying are the loss of livelihood and income of small coastal fisherfolk due to mangrove loss and fish decline, negative changes in agricultural practices, and human rights violations.

The most controversial shrimp project in Malaysia is in Kerpan (Kedah). Samak Aquaculture was

approved as a joint venture company in 1993, and 60% is owned by a Saudi firm named Saudi Ben Ladin, 10% by the Kedah State Government and 30% by a company set up to represent the interest of the landowners and farmers. Government support for commercial aquaculture has helped companies like Samak immensely. However, the most reprehensible aspect of the whole project is that land already owned by local farmers was expropriated by the State in order to serve corporate interests.

Initially the State government and Samak began to woo farmers and landowners in Kerpan to sell, lease their land or join in the venture. Some of the landowners agreed to join the project but most of the bigger landowners and farmers, totaling 800, refused. Thus, the State invoked the Land Acquisition Act to take over the 1,000 acres of paddy land. The Act allows the State to acquire any privately owned lands if it deems that the development projects started there will be economically beneficial to the country.

The State offered a compensation between RM18,000 and RM24,000 (RM3.8 = US\$1) per acre, but the landowners refused to accept the meagre compensation. In January 1995, about 100 farmers gathered at the entrance of the project site to stop excavators from moving into the site. Farmers held vigil in makeshift tents. In the next few days, police battalions gathered at the project site. A week later, heavy machinery moved into the project site. Rice farmers watched helplessly as bulldozers and heavy machinery began to tear up their paddy during harvest season.

Farmers, both men and women couldn't bear to watch and lay down on the road to prevent vehicles from moving in. The police arrested 33 of the protestors, comprising of 10 women and 23 men. The women were released after three days whilst the men spent seven days in jail. One of those detained lamented that "The tragic of the day is that we are the victims and we were arrested for defending our rights".

The village was still mired in land disputes after seven years, the ponds have been dug, but disease outbreaks, legal wrangles, management problems and conflict over land have meant that in the seven years of existence, the operation has lost millions of dollars and had yet to export any prawns. Meanwhile, the farmers of Kerpan have been living in economic uncertainty for the past seven years and with impending poverty and loss of their self-provisioning lands, they find it difficult to make ends meet. As a farmer in Kerpan states, "Each prawn produced here represents a teardrop that belongs to one of us. That's how much we have suffered".