
Tanzania: The death of the Rufiji Delta Prawn Project

The plans to build the world's largest shrimp aquaculture facility in the Rufiji Delta of Tanzania have encountered strong opposition from local people (see WRM Bulletin 40).

The Rufiji Delta, located about 150 km South of Dar es Salaam, contains the largest continuous block of mangrove forest in East Africa, comprising some 53,000 hectares. The Delta supports the most important fishery in Tanzania's coastline, accounting for about 80% of all wild-shrimp catches in the country. The Delta is home to approximately 41,000 people, many of whom are small farmers and traditional fishers. It provides important habitat for endangered animals and plants.

In 1997, the government approved a proposal by the African Fishing Company (AFC) to establish almost 20,000 hectares of shrimp farms there. The AFC wanted to use "public" land in the Delta to create shrimp ponds, hatchery, a processing plant, and a feed mill. Thirty-five percent of these facilities would be located within a "mangrove forest reserve", and the hatchery would be located on Bwejuu Island, which is part of the Mafia Island Marine Park.

The driving force behind the proposed project was the harvest of 6,210 kilograms of prawns per hectare per year which would be expected from the farm, with most exports going to Europe and Japan. The business would allegedly produce US\$500 million a year in export profits, but social and environmental experts said the damage to the environment would far outweigh the profit.

The National Environmental Management Council (NEMC) --the environmental advisory body of the Tanzanian government-- urged the government to reject the project on the grounds that it would have considerable negative impact on forestry, fisheries and marine environment, land use, water resources, as well as agriculture and wildlife. It would destroy 1,200 hectares of mangroves, including rare species such as *Rhizophora* and threaten habitats of a variety of endangered species. The proposed aquaculture operations would generate substantial pollution which would cause increased eutrophication, toxicity, and acidification of surrounding water resources.

In spite of NEMC's recommendation and over the objections of Tanzanian and international NGOs and agencies, the Tanzanian Cabinet approved the project. John R. Nolan, the majority shareholder of AFC, had also wanted to set up (in the Rufiji Delta) a fish mill and a fish processing factory all aimed at the Japanese, European and North American markets.

The project was strongly opposed by Tanzanian environmentalists, most notably the Journalist Environmental Association of Tanzania (JET), international environmental organisations, and local residents. From July 1997 to date, JET members have led the discussion on the negative impacts of shrimp aquaculture. Recently, 2,000 Rufiji Delta villagers filed an application with the Tanzanian High Court for permission to sue the Government to challenge the approval of the AFC project, and there is also another case pending in Court, filed by over 2,000 former employees of the company.

Finally, it seems that all those years of resistance to a damaging project have borne fruit. On August 15, 2001, it was announced in the press that the fishing vessels of AFC were to be sold through a

tender team supervised by the High Court of Tanzania, apparently to offset part of the company's huge debt, accumulated over the years by the Rufiji Delta Prawn Project as a result of the opposition of local people to its implementation. The liquidation of the company implies that the project has been halted, thus ensuring the survival of Tanzanian mangroves and preservation of their social, economic and environmental services.