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## Belize: Shrimp farming threatens Placencia Lagoon's mangroves

In 1999 local residents of Placencia Lagoon --a shallow water body fringed by mangroves and very rich in terrestrial and aquatic wildlife, located in southern Belize-- organized themselves to resist a project to build a two-lane causeway and a bridge across the Lagoon. The works would have caused a severe environmental impact, damaging ecotourism, the main activity in the area, as well as small scale fishing (see WRM Bulletin 23). A new threat is now pending on this rich ecosystem: industrial shrimp farming.

The Placencia Lagoon is largely responsible for the area's pristine waters and abundance of fish in the proximity to the Mesoamerican Barrier Reef, which furnish the basis for most resident's livelihood, and is a major scenario for ecotourism. The area has lately attracted shrimp farmers and "developers." Currently five shrimp farms are located on the Lagoon. Two new shrimp farms have been proposed and are in the process of applying for operational permits. Additionally, two of the existing ones have plans to expand and are in the final phase of approval for their respective permits.

Taking into account the deleterious effects of shrimp farming in many other tropical countries and the specific conditions of Placencia Lagoon's environment --which because of its soil composition and geology is likely to have a low carrying capacity and high pollution susceptibility-- it is expected that such expansion would lead to an environmental disaster. Already in 1997 a report prepared by UNDP for the Belize Coastal Zone Management Authority warned that the shrimp farming industry in the Placencia Lagoon area was rapidly approaching its limit for sustainable shrimp production.

Signs of what may occur in a near future have already been perceived. Local residents have witnessed a decline in the area's fish stock and fear that the new and expanded shrimp farm operations, plus increasing commercial and residential developments will continue to degrade the Lagoon environment and their livelihoods. However, the government appears to be more interested in the promotion of shrimp farming than in the protection of mangroves. Shrimp farmers enjoy a favourable tax policy as well as lack of regulations for pollution control and mitigation. To the official view, currency generated by industrial shrimp exports is more important than mangrove conservation.

Those interested in expressing their support to the Placencia Lagoon local communities to conserve their mangroves and livelihoods, are invited to visit:

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