
Cambodia: too late and too little to protect mangroves

During the decade of the 1990s the Cambodian government, supported by the World Bank, tried to promote large-scale industrial shrimp farming in the coastline of the country. In 1993, the Mangrove Action Project (MAP) helped to avoid that the Thai agri-business giant Charoen Pokphand opens up Cambodia's mangrove coasts to a black tiger prawn culture project. Nevertheless, the idea was not abandoned, and new investors from Thailand subsequently financed intensive black tiger shrimp aquaculture operations in Cambodia, importing equipment, expertise and even feed to that purpose. Koh Kong province, which shares an extensive border with Thailand, was invaded by shrimp farming ponds and the industry promised a future of prosperity for the region.

But in 1994, shrimp fever had reached Cambodia. Once again, like in Thailand and Taiwan before, this disease became the biggest enemy of the intensive shrimp aquaculture industry. It was expected that further developments -which would mean further mangrove destruction- would be stopped. The government itself admitted that the mangrove area in Cambodia had decreased from more than 63,000 hectares in 1992 to less than 16,000 in 1995, and the Ministry of the Environment blamed industrial shrimp farming for its depredatory activities, placing a temporary ban on new licenses. However, shrimp farming licences were still being given by the Fisheries Department after 1995, and only recently, as the situation was getting worse, new permits were prohibited.

Nowadays industrial shrimp ponds -that were supposed to bring prosperity to Koh Kong province- have been abandoned where mangroves once flourished. Thai capitals have also left the country . . . probably to establish their industry somewhere else, where mangroves are still standing.

Fifty per cent of mangrove areas worldwide have already disappeared and shrimp farming is one of the main causes for this environmental disaster. How long do we have to wait until further developments of this industry are halted for good?

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