
Local fisherfolk protect the mangroves in Sri Lanka

Mangroves are wetlands rich in biodiversity that are suffering a severe depredation worldwide. In Sri Lanka mangroves are associated with 22 brackish water bodies, locally known as lagoons. Even if mangroves area in that country is limited to 12,000 hectares, it is of much value since it includes very rare species and types of plant associations in different climatological zones. Fishing in these lagoons is the livelihood for over 120,000 coastal people.

Over the past decade many of the lagoons and estuaries in Sri Lanka have been subjected to rapid destruction of its mangrove vegetation for commercial aquaculture. This powerful industrial group is composed by big politicians, top level bureaucrats and businessmen, who have shown their lack of interest in mangrove conservation.

As a consequence of this unsustainable activity lagoons are silted, estuaries are eroded and mangrove ecosystems are deteriorated. In Puttlam District, for example, where the most extensive and rare mangrove species occur, more than 3,000 hectares of mangrove lands were converted to industrial shrimp farms under the government's patronage. Where the commercial shrimp farms are nowadays located, 28,000 lagoon fishers were engaged in fishing till 1994. After the construction of commercial shrimp farms two thirds of them lost their job and were obliged to migrate to the city in order to earn their living. Before the widespread of shrimp farming, the average fish catch per unit effort was 4 kg and by 1997, this had declined to 1.5 kg.

Commercial shrimp has also polluted groundwaters, what has directly affected drinking water, creating further problems for the fisher folk. At the village vicinity they do not have drinking water now and most of the women walk 5 to 6 km daily looking for fresh water. Due to lack of drinking water most of the children at the school age do not attend school; the reason is that in the morning they do not have water in the house and therefore their primary task is looking for water for their house consumption. All the lagoon periphery is blocked by the shrimp farmers who have constructed fences and maintain security personnel, what means that local fishers have even lost their right to access to the traditional source of their food.

Local communities of fishers have reacted organizing themselves to face this problem. The Small Fishers Federation was formed with the aim of mobilizing fishing communities and other associated people to conserve the lagoons and mangroves ecosystem, through appropriate education programmes and practical conservation strategies.

The primary task of the newly created group was to put the conflict on the table of negotiations. A participatory organizational mechanism was established, where more than 4,000 fishers actively participate in decision making on the conservation of mangroves, negotiate with shrimp farmers to monitor mangrove destruction activities and work for the improvement of fish habitats in the lagoons.

The following step was to create an organization that supports lagoon conservation and management committees where the fisher folk leaders from different lagoon fisher folk groups and government officials can dialogue to solve the conflict that affect their lives in such a hard way.

A so called Mangrove Conservation and Demonstration Centre was set up to carry out an education programme on mangroves and fish habitats. The Centre is visited daily by school children, university students and other interested people; publications in three official languages used in Sri Lanka are issued, and seminars and workshops are conducted in order to promote mangrove protection as the most effective and equitable way to conserve nature and maintain local people livelihoods.

Regarding practical conservation strategies, more than 100 hectares of degraded land has been reconverted to mangrove forest. To face the loss of jobs resulting from the decline of fishing and the lack of access to the lagoons, the Small Fishers Federation is working to introduce alternative income generation activities focusing their efforts with fisher folk, women and youth. More than 623 jobs have been already created by promoting animal husbandry and other appropriate income generation sectors.

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