
Tanzania: mangroves menaced by aquaculture project

The Rufiji Delta in South Eastern Tanzania is one of the largest blocks of mangrove forests in East and Southern Africa. It covers an area of about 53,255 hectares of unspoiled mangrove forest, that support a large number of people, and is rich in aquatic as well as terrestrial biodiversity. The delta is linked to the interior of the river system by an extensive flood plain covering about 130 km long and up to 20 km wide. It is also linked to a system of ocean currents and coral reefs surrounding Mafia island in the East and it influences fisheries production in the island through the northerly flow of marine currents.

Mangrove forests of the Rufiji Delta also stabilise the coastline by preventing coastal erosion, build land through accumulation of silt and the production of detritus, preserve the purity of water by absorbing pollutants from upstream sources and serve as windbreaks for the hinterland.

The Rufiji communities that rely on fish, mangrove poles and rice farming have made an ancestral sustainable use of this area. A proposed industrial prawn project by the African Fishing Company purported to use semi-intensive production methods would privatise one third of the Rufiji Delta. From experiences in other parts of the world, on average, semi-intensive prawn farms fail after about ten years. This eventually will therefore threaten the lives of thousands of local farmers and fishermen living in the delta; with severe environmental implications to the ecology and irreparable damage.

A proposal to establish the same by Coastal Aquaculture at the Tana delta in Kenya -an area with ecological features similar to those of Rufiji Delta- is still unresolved since mid 1992. The company purchased 10,000 hectares of land for this purpose. Later the land allocation was nullified by the Kenyan government through a presidential directive declaring the Tana Delta a wetland of international importance. However the Coastal Aquaculture company challenged this decision in court after which the high court ruled in their favour in 1996, meaning that the company may proceed to develop the 10,000 hectares for prawn farming.

In spite of their sustainable use of natural resources and adequate management of the environment, local communities are usually left out when resource management plans are being made. That is why more than 2000 Rufiji delta residents filed a chamber application with the Tanzanian High Court seeking for permission to sue the government for endorsing the prawn farm project which will affect their economic well being. They argue that this aquaculture project will deny them access; through plans that are underway to fence off the prawn project area; to the natural resources including prawns, fish and other marine resources with which they have coexisted from time immemorial. They further state that the decision to allow the project to go ahead was taken without taking into account the environmental hazards the project will cause to the area. Furthermore the decision to undertake this "development" project was taken without their consent and involvement.

Local NGOs JET and LEAT, have been and still are the mainstay NGOs in Tanzania openly opposing this project. There was recently a meeting between EAWLS, JET, and other NGOs in Tanzania regarding the Rufiji Delta. Plans are being made to hold a 2nd East African Regional Workshop which will highlight present concerns regarding both Rufiji Delta in Tanzania and Tana Delta in Kenya.

Source: Patricia Nzioka, East African Wild Life Society (EAWLS); Environment Tanzania (JET), 23/5/1998.