

The Privatization of Mangroves

Indigenous and traditional peoples in Ecuador are demanding that shrimp aquaculture companies be penalized for seizing mangrove areas

44

On 15 October 2008, Rafael Correa Delgado, President of the Republic of Ecuador, and four Ministers of State, promulgated Decree 1391, which regularizes industrial shrimp aquaculture. But the Decree contains an inherent contradiction. On the one hand, it recognizes the illegality of the thousands of hectares of ponds dedicated to shrimp aquaculture (for hatching and rearing tropical shrimp), as well as the clearing of mangroves that results from the activities of the shrimp industry. On the other hand,

demanding, of successive governments, the restoration of mangrove areas occupied with impunity by industrial shrimp aquaculture.

Mangrove ecosystems are regarded as amongst the five most productive types of ecosystems in the world. Alarmed by their destruction, Ecuador's Official Register No. 722 of 6 July 1987 declared as a 'protected forest', a land area covering 362,802 ha, located in five hydrographical systems of coastal Ecuador, containing mangroves, other forest species and saline areas.

A study carried out by the Centre for Integrated Natural Resource Mapping by Remote Sensing (Centro de Levantamientos Integrados de Recursos Naturales por Sensores Remotos or CLIRSEN) in 2000 revealed that 254,593 ha of mangroves had been cleared, equivalent to 70 per cent of Ecuador's original mangrove area. On the other hand, the III Agricultural Census of 2001 determined that there were 234,359 ha of shrimp farms.

Historically, Ecuadorian legislation has prohibited the felling, burning or destruction of mangroves. Penalties for such destruction include fines, forced restoration of the area destroyed, and even imprisonment.

Communities deprived

However, the recent Decree 1391 completely ignores current legislation, and rewards the shrimp aquaculture industry that has destroyed the mangroves and deprived local communities of their sources of life and livelihoods, requiring them to reforest only a minimal percentage of what was

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the illegality ends up being rewarded through the gifting of concessions to the shrimp industry in areas categorized as 'national assets for public use' (Bien Nacional de Uso Público), thus violating 56 legal provisions that have protected Ecuador's mangrove ecosystems since the 1970s.

The measure that 'regularizes' illegal actions (which, in practice, will now become legalized) sets a precedent of legal uncertainty for environmental matters and in securing the economic, social, cultural and environmental rights of indigenous and traditional fishing communities and communities of artisanal gatherers on the Ecuadorian coast, who have been violently displaced from their territories and who have unrelentingly

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destroyed, and absolving them from the payment of fines and other punitive measures.

Decree 1391 not only violates Ecuador's laws and codes, but, above all, the text of the Constitution, approved by majority vote on behalf of the Ecuadorian people on 28 September 2008. The new Constitution, commended internationally for its progressive constitutional text, establishes a series of environmental rights, water rights and people's rights, which are now violated by Decree 1391.

The lives of indigenous peoples and traditional communities in mangrove ecosystems are intimately linked to their natural environment. Not only does the ecosystem benefit local communities, but it also fulfils ecological functions that are vital for the planet. It is worth recalling the terrifying Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004, in which the destruction of mangroves, which had previously provided a natural protective barrier and windbreak against storms and tidal surges, resulted in entire towns being demolished and thousands of people killed or gravely injured, not to mention enormous material damages.

Mangroves are also important for the desalination of waters that flow inland, which allows the use of coastal lands for agriculture, particularly for food production. The fish, molluscs and crustaceans—protected during their spawning and larval stages by the mangroves' elevated root systems—are the main source of food for the people of Ecuador.

Ecuadorians' food sovereignty will be seriously affected by the privatization of the country's coasts, and by handing them over to industrial shrimp aquaculture. The industry produces prized crustaceans for export, which grace the tables of consumers in the North, as cultivated shrimps are rarely eaten in the producer countries, being principally an export commodity. And all this is happening at the cost of the mangroves, which support the life of the fish, molluscs and crustaceans.

Faced with resistance to shrimp consumption by environmental and consumer groups in Europe, due mainly to the high levels of chemicals and

antibiotics used in intensive industrial aquaculture, in recent decades, the industry has opted for organic shrimp production, aiming for a 'green' label for their product.

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ponds, mangroves have been felled; rivers, estuaries and canals polluted; and countrywide, people who gather shellfish and crabs have been displaced and even murdered, sometimes simply for passing by the shrimp ponds.

Green label

Organic shrimp may well benefit the health of consumers in countries of the North so long as it can be proved that the entire shrimp production chain is organic. This is not the case, as shown by international organizations that have analyzed the certified shrimp products. While a green label implies that production is environmentally and socially beneficial, in actual reality, this is not the case in Ecuador.



Santa Cagua, woman shellfisher from Muisne, Esmeraldas, Ecuador. The destruction of mangroves in Ecuador is depriving local communities of their sources of life and livelihoods

C-CONDEM

C-CONDEM is a grouping of associations and grass-roots communities of gatherers and artisanal fishers, federations, and unions of indigenous and traditional communities from mangrove ecosystems, as well as environmental and social NGOs from Esmeraldas, Manabí, Santa Elena, Guayas, El Oro and Pichincha in Ecuador.

C-CONDEM's mission is to defend, conserve and restore mangrove and associated ecosystems, securing their vitality, as well as that of the indigenous and traditional communities who are faced with threats and negative impacts from environmentally destructive activities.

This is what the representatives of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), National Co-ordinating Committee for the Defence of Mangrove Ecosystems (C-CONDEM) and Redmanglar International were demonstrating about during the so-called "Shrimp Dialogue" promoted by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) at the start of the month of October in Ecuador in the city of Guayaquil. This supposed 'dialogue' was announced as part of the Aqua Fair (Feria Aqua) 2008, a meeting of shrimp companies from around the world, in which local communities had no place whatsoever.

At the end of that fair, representatives from the affected communities published a letter (see http://www.ccondem.org.ec/imagesFTP/7180.carta_ingles.pdf) in which they described the reasons why the principles that form the fundamental basis for shrimp certification should be rejected. They are demanding that, rather than having a dubious 'shrimp dialogue' to certify the shrimp aquaculture industry, an international tribunal should be created to investigate and punish the shrimp industry for all the crimes against humanity that it has committed.

Certification has the objective of assuring the consumer of a socially and environmentally responsible

product. However, in the case of shrimp aquaculture in Ecuador, certification is based on the destruction of the mangrove ecosystem and the impoverishment of the country's indigenous and traditional peoples.

The mangrove ecosystems provide the basis for feeding Ecuador's people, and they generate honest jobs for local communities, in a context where shellfish beds, and fish and crab stocks are being wiped out daily. Their natural habitats are disappearing under the barrage of mechanical diggers, which, in the space of days, can transform a rich and luxuriant thousand-year old mangrove area into a shrimp pond.

Indigenous and traditional populations from the areas of Ecuador that have long supported mangrove ecosystems demand that Decree 1391 be repealed and that shrimp aquaculture companies be penalized for seizing mangrove areas. This has been reiterated in the Manifesto of Indigenous and Traditional People from Mangrove Ecosystems against the Regularization and Certification of the Shrimp Aquaculture Industry (see <http://www.ccondem.org.ec/boletin.php?c=518>).

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