

Mangrove protection

Fact or fiction?**The control of shrimp exports from Thailand is based on considerations not purely environmental**

The US government recently lifted the ban on wild shrimps imported from Thailand. The ban had been in force since May 1995, consequent to the Earth Island Institute winning a lawsuit against the US government, on the ground that Thailand lacks the same measures that the US has to conserve sea turtles.

But now the game seems to be over and wild shrimps from Thailand can freely access US markets. It appears that the Thai and US governments are cheating the conservationists. There are about 30,000 trawlers operating in Thai waters, but only 2,000 vessels will be equipped with Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs), as these are the ones which are supposed to catch shrimps. In fact, the trawler fishery in Thailand has never been separated into different sectors catching shrimps and demersal fish species. The fishermen say they use the same trawl net to catch both fish and shrimp. Depending on when fishing is done, shrimps can be caught at night and fishes during the day.

In contrast to Western nations like, say, Australia, Thai shrimp and fish trawlers are extremely different because shrimping boats consider fish as by-catch, and so their nets are actually designed to avoid trapping fish.

Wild shrimps reside on the seabed near the shore, which is also the habitat of sea turtles. As a result, TEDs are needed so as to release the turtle by-catch. However, fish trawlers may not need them, as they catch in the high seas. In the West, fish trawlers are often as big as floating fishmeal factories.

That means tens of thousands of tonnes of Thai wild shrimps exported to the US yearly come from those 30,000 trawlers, not from the 2,000 shrimping boats, as

claimed by Thai officials. Thus, sea turtles and other marine species in Thai waters are in danger, whether the trawlers are equipped with TEDs or not. It is a fact that trawlers always violate the fishery law that limits the three-km offshore area as a trawler-free zone. Thai fishery officials even inform the US officials that this law is a tough measure to protect sea turtles and their nesting grounds.

But, indeed, it has never been successfully enforced. The US officials too seem to regard the magic TEDs as an absolute solution to the problem of sea turtle conservation in Thailand. Recently, they checked about 441 trawlers and found that 370 had attached TEDs to their trawl nets. This observation, however, was made at the fishing ports, but whether the fishermen will use the TEDs or not, once out at sea, is another issue.

Eventually, the embargo on Thai wild shrimps was simply lifted. According to us diplomats, the US government is likely to hesitate in imposing a ban on Thai shrimp exports. It was only the ruling of the court that made it enforce the ban. It is almost certain that once TEDs are in place, the US administration will never raise more questions.

Chareon Pokphan, a large aquaculture group in Thailand, says that only two things in the world can ruin Thai shrimp farming—trade sanctions and environmental sanctions. These are imminent.

Taxes raised

Next January the European Union (EU) will raise the import tax on agricultural products from Thailand. The EU's real target is farmed shrimps from Thailand, which is notorious as a destroyer of mangrove forests. Currently, farmed

shrimps from Thailand exported to the EU attract a tax of around five per cent, the same as in Ecuador and Indonesia.

But next year, this will rise by 10 percent and then, over the next three years, by 15 per cent. This measure will ensure that the price of farmed shrimps in Thailand drops immediately by 30 per cent. To counter the EU attack, the aquaculture business group hired a recognized marine biologist to conduct research to rebut the EU accusation.

According to the research, 80 per cent of shrimp farming in Thailand employs the intensive method, using small areas to produce large quantities of shrimp. By feeding the shrimps with high-quality *food* and antibiotics, and by pumping fresh air into the pond around the clock, a one-acre size pond can produce, in just 100 days, tonnes of marketable-sized shrimps.

If 80 per cent of shrimp farms in Thailand are intensively cultivated, then only 20 per cent of the ponds invade mangrove forests. These use the traditional method or extensive system which pumps sea water into the ponds for six months or more, until the eggs of shrimps and fishes grow naturally, before being harvested.

The traditional aquaculture system is a shifting cultivation in mangrove forests, where fishermen slash the forests, dig

ponds and move on to other plots, before reversing the process. In fact, the traditional system is subsistence-oriented and self-sustaining, as the fishermen raise shrimps during the dry season, when the soil becomes saline.

But when the rains come, the fresh water pushes salt water away, so that the fishermen can grow rice. Of course, the ponds and paddy fields are in the mangrove area but on the higher ground covered by creepers rather than mangroves.

The boycott of farmed shrimps from Thailand will only encourage other nations to destroy mangrove forests. Once Thai shrimps are absent from the world market, the demand will rise and encourage other shrimp-exporting nations to produce more shrimps to fill the demand-supply gap.

Since a great deal of shrimp farms in large shrimp-exporting countries, such as Ecuador and Indonesia, still use extensive aquaculture, where productivity is low and reliance on land is the norm, increasing production means that mangrove forests will be extensively devastated.

Trespassing

The problem, however, is that shrimp culture, regardless of farming systems, encroaches on mangrove forests, since

trespassing the forests costs less than buying paddy fields or rubber plantations to create the ponds.

Vast areas of forests can be got by paying off corrupt officials. The encroachers know that raising shrimps in mangroves is unsustainable: after three crops, the ponds will get totally polluted. But who cares, as long as more and more ponds can be dug in the forests. Last August, the Forestry Department of Thailand revoked logging concessions in the mangrove forests.

About 600,000 acres of concession areas have been closed and redefined as a conservation zone. However, the logging ban is irrelevant in protecting the mangroves from invasion of shrimp farms, as very few concession areas are converted, compared to upcountry concession areas which are defined as economic or even conservation zones. In these areas, over 300,000 acres have been illegally converted into shrimp ponds.

Various measures of the Thai government to protect mangrove forests and control pollutants from shrimp farming are just making things look good, and are fostering shrimp exports, but the condition of mangrove forests in Thailand has not really improved. ♣

This piece has been sent by Alfredo Quarto, Co-Director of the Mangrove Action Project, Seattle, us, who obtained it from a communication from an independent source in Thailand