The emergence of global alliances of environmental and peasant-based NGOs against industrial shrimp farming: Historical perspectives and implications to fisheries policy in developing countries

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SUMMARY: The explosive growth of industrial shrimp farming in tropical coastal zones of Asia, Latin America, and Africa is generating mounting criticisms over its social, economic, and environmental consequences. Recent years have seen the proliferation and growth of global alliances of environmental and peasant-based nongovernment organizations (NGOs) opposed to shrimp farming—resulting in the establishment of a global environmental and political arena around shrimp farming. Understanding the dynamics of this current trend will enable us to forecast future events and thus take precautions and formulate fisheries policy rationally. This paper takes stock of this current trend, contextualizes it within a larger set of historical and environmental issues, and points out the implications of this trend to fisheries policy in developing countries.

KEY WORDS: environmental movements, NGOs, shrimp farming, aquaculture, fisheries policy, Third World

INTRODUCTION

Aquaculture combined with Third World development initiatives is extolled to herald the dawn of a “Blue Revolution.”1) Like its predecessor, the Green Revolution, the Blue Revolution employs new technologies in the production of new food species, thus reducing hunger and increasing economic self-sufficiency. Also like the Green Revolution, the Blue Revolution has the potential to cause social and cultural changes. Moreover, as the Green Revolution was necessary to the establishment of the global agro-food system, the Blue Revolution is an essential part of integrating many important aquatic species and coastal ecosystems into that same global system.2)

Shrimp farming industry started in Southeast Asia, where coastal shrimp farming using an extensive production system has been practiced for hundreds of years.3) During the late 1970s and early 1980s, shrimp farming using a semi-intensive production system was adopted in Latin America (most notably Ecuador and Honduras). Asia adopted intensive systems of production during the mid-1980s. In the late 1990s, the potential for shrimp production in Africa, particularly Tanzania, were tapped by investors.

Since the 1980s, total production of farmed shrimp has grown at a faster rate than any other aquacultural product.4) World production of farm-raised shrimp increased 300 percent from 1975 to 1985 and rose 250 percent from 1985 to 1995. In 1998, total production of farm-raised shrimp—an estimated 737,200 metric tons—was about 30 percent of the total world shrimp production. A recent industry projection reveals that farmed shrimp may represent 54 percent of world shrimp production by 2005.5) The world production of farm-raised shrimp in 1999 was 814,250 metric tons; approximately 79 percent of cultured shrimp are raised in Asia, while the rest come primarily from Latin America.6) Thailand, the world’s largest producer of cultured shrimp since 1991, produced 25 percent of total world production of farmed shrimp in 1999. Other major producers in 1999 are China (14 percent), Indonesia (12 percent), and Ecuador (10 percent). Among aquacultural crops, cultivated shrimp is the largest consumer of commercial aquaculture feeds and account for the largest number of companies involved in aquaculture.7)

The explosive growth of the shrimp industry has generated mounting criticisms over its social, economic, and environmental consequences. The
escalating conflicts between critics and supporters of industrial shrimp farming have transcended local and national arenas. This article takes stock of these developments, presents the larger set of historical and environmental issues that embrace them, and points out the implications of these developments to fisheries policy.

BLUE REVOLUTION OR RED HERRING? THE FOUNDATIONS OF RESISTANCE

Although local protests against shrimp farming have addressed concerns such as increasing pollution, declines in access to drinking water, and degradation of soil quality, at the heart of the conflicts stemming from industrial shrimp farming is the loss of common-pool resources. As pointed out by Bailey, industrial shrimp farming transformed what has been multiple-use/multiple-user areas into privately owned, single-purpose resources. This abruptly changed the life of local people and forced them to find other sources of livelihood. It was also observed that fishers are being denied access to beaches and hence the ability to launch boats from the shore because of private ownership of coastal areas by shrimp companies. These observations would lead one to ask whether aquaculture heralds a "Blue Revolution," or is it a "red herring"—something that distracts attention from the real issue.

TRANSNATIONAL AND GLOBAL RESISTANCE TO SHRIMP FARMING

Stonich and Bailey documented the tensions that have catalyzed the formation of global alliances of environmental and peasant-based NGOs opposed to shrimp farming and industry groups seeking to counter the claims and campaigns of the resistance coalition. They noted that major environmental groups, including Greenpeace, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), and the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), as well as private foundations such as the MacArthur Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, have become involved in the network resisting industrial shrimp farming. These organizations and individuals have found common cause with less well-known NGOs such as Mangrove Action Project (MAP) and several hundred community-based NGOs in developing countries. In 1997, these groups established the Industrial Shrimp Action Network (ISA Net).

The highlights of the movement towards the formation of global alliances of environmental and peasant-based NGOs against industrial shrimp farming are as follows:

• In 1996, the Mangrove Action Project (MAP) based in Seattle, Washington, co-organized an international strategy session to ensure that consumer campaigns in the United States on shrimp issues would be consistent with the needs of the grassroots organizations directly affected by the problems. The first meeting, styled the "Shrimp Tribunal," brought several environmental organizations from developed countries together with about a dozen grassroots NGO leaders from developing countries.

• Grassroots groups and other NGOs issued a call for governmental accountability with regards to aquaculture during the April 1996 meeting of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) in New York.

• The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) created an Internet Website, The Shrimp Tribunal (now the Shrimp Sentinel), designed to serve as a public forum where government officials were asked to respond to specific concerns and charges on a country-by-country basis.

• An international NGO forum on aquaculture was held in Honduras in October 1996. This forum resulted in a joint statement signed by over 20 organizations which called for a global moratorium on shrimp aquaculture expansion.

• Over 20 NGOs from 17 tropical countries attended the annual meeting and trade show of the World Aquaculture Society (WAS) in February 1997. A symposium was held at the WAS meetings during which NGO representatives criticized industrial shrimp production as socially oppressive and environmentally destructive.

• In October 1997, more than 30 NGO leaders from more than 14 countries met for a joint strategy planning in Santa Barbara, California. The group agreed to create the Industrial Shrimp Action Network (ISA Net) which aims to draw international attention to the social and environmental costs of industrial shrimp farming.

LOCAL RESISTANCE AND TRANSNATIONAL NETWORKING: THE LARGER HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Having presented some of the primary influences leading to the present local resistance to shrimp farming and the prevailing characteristics of transnational networking, I will contextualize this current trend within a larger set historical and environmental issues.

Investigating environmental movements, or social movements in general, involves exploration of one of the most fundamental issues: the intersection of history and biography. The social movements of the 1960s, the momentous changes in eastern
Europe and the former Soviet Union, and the rise of nationalist movements have shown that people make their own history. Theoretical and empirical works on social movements have investigated questions central to environmental movement research: What explains the timing of social movements? Why do they emerge and grow at particular times and not other times? Who participates in social movements and why? How are individuals recruited to join in collective action? How do people's values, grievances, and identities connect to the goals and strategies of social movements?

Analysis of the larger historical circumstances is crucial in understanding the emergence of environmental activism in the world. Historically, environmental problems have not necessarily generated locally based grassroots environmental movements. The environmental movement in the United States arose in the 1960s as part of a larger critique that included civil rights, the women's movement, and the antiwar and student movements. Grassroots organizations emerged as established environmental organizations became entrenched in Washington, D.C. and focused on politics, lobbying, and compromise. These grassroots organizations raised public consciousness through education and research and took direct action against environmental problems such as toxic waste sites, chemical pollution, and radiation exposure.

Grassroots environmental movements have found common ground outside national borders at a time when preservation of biodiversity and the rights of indigenous peoples have become global concerns. Such groups simultaneously assert locality and legitimate local concerns with reference to global environmental concerns, and they are increasingly brought into transnational informational and funding networks. At the same time, NGOs from developed countries disseminate local concerns, generalizing them so that they partake of global environmental concerns. This state of affairs has given rise to an interest in the process of globalization and the linking of local environmentalisms to transnational, metropolitan discourses. Recent years have therefore witnessed the rapid proliferation and growth of local, national, and transnational environmental NGOs, national bureaucracies concerned with environmental management, and transnational institutions charged with implementing various forms of global environmental governance.

A related development is the increasing deployment by local communities of the language of environmentalism as part of an effort to challenge traditional structures of domination, often against destructive resource extraction practices or forms of resource exploitation that do not take account of local rights. Environmental debates are, in many instances, tied to broader struggles for democratization and human rights. These efforts are intended to empower historically disempowered communities, to preserve biodiversity, or to secure lives free from the threat of pollution.

All in all, what these historical circumstances tell us is that environmental movements surrounding the shrimp industry is part of a global trend towards increased environmental activism and Third World concerns being increasingly brought into transnational informational and funding networks.

ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENTS AND FISHERIES POLICY

Having considered some of the sources for contemporary environmentalism surrounding the shrimp industry, I will identify a series of concerns that fisheries scholars and policymakers will have to address in future efforts.

Many thoughtful observers rely on the economic benefits of aquaculture to move the developing world into a higher level of well-being. But social and economic indices frequently slip out of phase with one another. Even when the aggregate economic data indicate growth, benefits may not reach the local population fast enough, or on a large enough scale, to remove the sense of rootlessness and dependence at the core of contemporary unease in areas affected by industrial shrimp farming.

Social order requires consensus which presupposes that the differences between the advantaged and those disadvantaged local population who are in the position to undermine operations in shrimp farms, be of such a nature that the disadvantaged can still see some prospect of raising themselves by their own effort. In the absence of such a consciousness, turbulence, both within the industry and among societies, will mount.

Early warning signs of the potential political weight of those who believe themselves at the mercy of forces they feel powerless to influence were shown in the demonstrations against globalization at meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in 2000 and the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization in 1999. To be sure many of these demonstrations against globalization and criticisms against industrial shrimp farming follow an all too familiar anti-market and anti-
capitalist script from the 1960s and early 1970s. Moreover, these demonstrations and criticisms may well reflect ideological disdain for existing political and economic institutions that is independent of specific grievances.

Nevertheless, fisheries policymakers must not ignore the emotional vacuum which the protests reflect, lest the aquaculture sector, a critical source of high-quality animal protein essential to feed growing human populations in light of stagnating or declining marine stocks, becomes submerged in the political assault polarizing especially the developing countries most in need of its benefits.

No industry can be sustained without a political base. An international sense of social responsibility must be fostered without strangling the shrimp farming industry in regulations imposed by bureaucrats. Consensus can emerge if policymakers help identify the problems and design forums for deliberate discussion and decision to deal with the long-term challenges of the aquaculture sector. Decision-making process should involve the greatest possible number of those who will be obliged to carry out the decisions, thus giving them a stake both in their execution and presentation to the public. All in all, the introduction of a social dimension to fisheries policy decisions shows the subjectivity inherent in scientifically based decisions and the necessity to keep fisheries management decisions transparent and participatory.

Policymakers driven by short-term pressure are reluctant to take on problems the existence of which is not yet apparent and the solution of which require a long-term time frame extending beyond their term of office. They are tempted to go along with the tendency to treat fisheries phenomena as autonomous and essentially unrelated to the political process. Yet the great changes in the fisheries sector in the coming years might well be driven by our need for some kind of a political vision and pursuit of a standard of justice.

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