

# LIVELIHOOD IDENTITY: HOW FOOD IS USED AS RESISTANCE IN THE MANGROVE ECOSYSTEMS OF ECUADOR

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*ABSTRACT: Since the late 1960s, the development of the shrimp-farm industry in Ecuador has contributed to extensive ecological damage to mangrove areas. Consequently, the livelihood of those reliant on these ecosystems has been severely threatened. In response, the population mobilized a national grassroots movement. They used food to articulate resistance against the shrimp-farm industry as well as the Ecuadorian government, both of which have contributed to the destruction of coastal mangroves. The “livelihood identity,” or collective sense of belonging, among ancestral mangrove people, those who are not necessarily native to the mangroves but who engage in their protection and maintenance over time, has motivated communities to protect not only their food source, but also their way of life. This paper is focused on analyzing how the expansion of the shrimp-farm industry has altered resource availability and access in the mangrove communities of Ecuador and given rise to social movements that utilize food culture as a tool of resistance.*

**“Mangroves are the supermarkets of the coastal poor.”**

– Pisti Charnsnoh, Thai campaigner for coastal ecosystems and community rights (Warne 2011, 3).

Mangrove refers to trees and shrubs that make up the overall plant community which are unique to tropical and subtropical regions (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). They are found along coastal tidelands and estuaries where fresh and salt water converge (McCally, 1999). They are most often characterized by their salt-tolerant evergreen forests and their aerial rooting systems, which are exposed during the day and covered by water during high tide (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). Mangroves provide water and soil filtration, storm barrier and surge protection, carbon storage, and habitat for flora and fauna (Latorre, 2014). Though all of this is important to understanding the value of these coastal environments, mangroves are so much more than the lush, bio-diverse ecology that they embody or the ecosystem services that they provide. To the ancestral people of coastal Ecuador, mangroves are a livelihood. To those looking to extort natural resources for profit, mangroves are money ponds just waiting to be tapped.

Around the late 1960s, when mangroves began to be exploited for shrimp production in Ecuador, “society and the scientific community only valued mangroves for what they could be converted into” (Hamilton, 2013). Ecuador was the first Latin American country to invest in the shrimp aquaculture industry. The Ecuadorian government began leasing out the land to the shrimp-farm industry in a process of concessions (Latorre, 2014). Due to the major boost that shrimp exports gave to the country’s economy, the “consequences on the way of life of those populations linked to the mangrove ecosystem were overlooked” (Latorre, 2014). Between 1969 and 1984, the average loss of mangroves per year was 1,439 hectares (ha). The destruction continued into the 1990s and early 2000s as shrimp became Ecuador’s most profitable export. The immediate costs of mangrove deforestation have been “mainly borne by the poor, who depend directly on these natural resources for their livelihoods” (Latorre, 2014). As a result, it has been impoverished, isolated

communities where local resistance movements have gained their momentum.

As more ancestral mangrove people began to recognize the harm being done by industrial shrimp-farm operations, a notion of “livelihood identity” formed among mangrove communities (Latorre 2014). This concept can be described as a means of basing collective and territorial rights on a sense of belonging ancestrally within a natural ecosystem (Latorre 2014). Additionally, “livelihood identity” has to do with distancing from racial connotations normally associated with the dominant conception of “indigeneity” (Latorre 2014). The politics of identity are aimed at “unifying and mobilizing a racially heterogeneous” group that is connected by their shared reliance on mangrove resources for food and income (Latorre 2014). Therefore, the actions taken by these groups are conceptualized as “livelihood movements” or as part of the “environmentalism of the poor” (Latorre 2014; Martínez-Alier, 2002). Their struggle is a response to the depleting resources in the environment that serve as their source of livelihood.

It is through this collective struggle that food culture becomes a method of resistance. By continuing traditional practices of gathering and fishing while also openly standing in opposition to the shrimp industry that threatens to destroy them, ancestral mangrove people are articulating their resistance. Mangroves are to livelihood as deforestation is to poverty. Without access to the mangroves, the ancestral people of these areas cannot maintain their way of life. Under these circumstances, the loss of mangroves to deforestation is a very real threat to the majority of the population. Grassroots resistance movements emerging from the mangrove communities of Ecuador are engaged in a collective formation of identity. Their shared livelihood identity strengthens opposition to the shrimp-farms’ invasion of mangrove environments.

### **Food (In)Security and the Ecuadorian Government’s Role in the Shrimp Industry**

Shrimp-farms were perceived to have many benefits in the early years of development, one being a boost to the national economy, another being increased food security for the Ecuadorian people. The former worked out smoothly. Ecuador reached the “highest export level of its history in 1998, when shrimp contributed to 26% of total private exports of the country” (Rivera-Ferre, 2009). The same success cannot be said for the latter, however.

Despite government initiatives to make food security a priority over the last few decades, actions have not been consistent with policy. In 2008, newly elected president Rafael Correa rewrote Ecuador’s constitution in which it was specified as the State’s responsibility to prevent ecosystem destruction. This new constitution ultimately determined that “communities have the right to benefit from environmental resources” (Warne, 2011). However, before the international community had even finished applauding the historic decision to institutionalize environmental rights, Correa issued Decree 1391, which legalized the country’s illicit shrimp farms (Warne, 2011). It was a significant step backwards in that it reflected decades-old Ecuadorian policy, which prioritized monoculture and the export of non-sustainable products (Giunta, 2014). In exchange for cooperation from the shrimp companies in funding minimal mangrove reforestation, the decree “absolved them from punishment for violating mangrove-protection laws,” not to mention the human rights of local populations (Warne, 2011). The decree regularized illegal farms, essentially gifting land to shrimp farmers on the principle that mangroves are “national assets of public use” (Yépez, 2008). According to mangrove activists and inhabitants, this undermined the progress made in the new constitution and violated environmental, water, and human rights (Yépez, 2008). What it didn’t do was promote food security, a declared

“strategic goal” of the Ecuadorian government since the 1980s (Giunta, 2014).

Food security is an admittedly difficult goal to achieve. There are three major pillars of food security: availability, access, and use (knowledge of nutrition and care). Unfortunately the introduction of shrimp aquaculture in Ecuador has not been shown to uphold any of these critical pillars. Shrimp is one of the most profitable branches of the seafood industry today. Demand has increased, with the U.S. consuming 40 percent of the world’s shrimp, Europe and Japan as close seconds (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). The way the current system works, shrimp is produced in the global South to be exported to “grace the tables of consumers in the North” (Yépez, 2008). Meanwhile, the 0.6 percent of the Ecuadorian population who are employed by the shrimp companies receives little to no benefits (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). In reality, the development of shrimp aquaculture has never been about food security (Warne 2011, pp. 34). Elaine Corets is the Latin American coordinator of the Mangrove Action Project<sup>3</sup> (MAP), a nonprofit organization based in Port Angeles, Washington. According to Corets, shrimp is “an exotic species farmed in ponds created by destroying local ecosystems and exported to wealthy countries for the consumption of over-weight people who don’t need any more protein or cholesterol in their diet” (Warne, 2011). There’s really nothing left to add except for the fact that the globalization of the shrimp-farm industry had led to food *insecurity* for the countries actually producing the food.

This has not gone unnoticed by the ancestral mangrove people of Ecuador. They recognize that shrimp-farming is a “capital-intensive enterprise” rather than a labor-intensive one (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). Case-in-point, employment is often limited to low-wage jobs in the labor and security sectors (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). Activists have argued that one hectare of shrimp farm “provides 0.1 employment while one hectare of mangrove

produces enough resources to feed at least 10 families” (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b). According to those same activists however, the concern is not so much how many jobs the shrimp industry *creates*, but rather how many livelihoods it *destroys* (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006b).

### **The Gendered Impact of Shrimp Farming in Mangrove Environments**

The areas that have been transformed into industrial shrimp operations have gone from “a multi-use public resource to a single-use private asset to a derelict waste” (Warne, 2011).

In some areas of present-day Ecuador, over 90 percent of mangroves have been wiped out since the early 1970s (Warne, 2011). Clear cutting has contributed to shoreline erosion and loss of fragile habitat. In addition, existing shrimp-farm operations use chemicals and antibiotics to prevent disease in the shrimp ponds. The excess fluid is dumped into the estuaries flowing through the mangroves, resulting in extensive fish and crab kills (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). Despite the uncertainty and danger, women do most of their labor in these contaminated estuaries.

Veuthey and Hamilton point out the importance of recognizing the disproportional effect pollution and deforestation events have on particular groups, especially women. Those most at risk include: 1) Women who live in the interior of the mangrove where most of the clear-cutting has occurred, 2) those without boats who cannot access open-ocean fishing, and 3) the poor (Hamilton, 2013). Anyone existing at the intersection of these three groups is in a very vulnerable position and faces a higher risk of poverty than others living in the mangroves. Across Ecuador, it was women who became most active in grassroots movements to defend the mangroves. According to Veuthey and Gerber, poor women disproportionately bear the consequences of industrial shrimp farming activities. This is why women became so critical in organizing resistance movements against the

seafood corporations; they had everything to lose if the destruction was allowed to continue (Veuthey, et al. 2012).

In considering women's involvement in the protection of mangroves, it is important to note that initially it was a considerable challenge for women to meet at all (Veuthey, et al., 2012). Husbands would forbid their wives from attending grassroots meetings or events (Veuthey, et al., 2012). Due to the gendered division of labor and power, women were expected to either stay in the home or be working in the estuaries. In becoming community leaders and activists, women participants challenged power relations "on one hand, between local poor communities and regional or national elites, and, on the other hand, between men and women in their own villages" (Veuthey, et al., 2012). Their assertion of their right to a livelihood resisted the assumption by both the shrimp industry and men in their communities that women would remain complacent.

### **The Livelihood Impact and Community Response**

In 1996, the Ecuadorian government allocated 52,000 hectares in the northern Esmeraldas province for the creation of the Cayapas-Mataje Ecological Mangrove Reserve (Reserva Ecológica de Manglares Cayapas Mataje, REMACAM in Spanish). Although the reserve is one of the most pristine mangrove ecosystems in Ecuador, the shrimp industry maintains 45 farms within the reserve's borders, occupying a total of 3,114 hectares (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006; Warne, 2011). The vast majority of these farms, 90 percent, are illegal, but little is done to enforce the law. The farms are located in the central and southern areas of REMACAM, impacting fishing and cockle gathering-reliant communities such as Tambillo. In response, the National Coordinating Committee for the Defense of the Mangrove Ecosystem (C-CONDEM<sup>2</sup> in Spanish), grassroots resistance movements such as the Foundation for the Ecological Defense

of Muisne (FUNDECOL in Spanish) and local communities devised a stewardship practice called "*custodias*" (Ocampo-Thomason 2006, pp. 150). Through this practice, sections of mangrove forest are designated to each community "for their traditional use and management" (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). This strategy is based on evidence that mangrove communities know how to manage natural resources in a sustainable way, the reason being that their futures depend on the health of mangrove ecosystems (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). Losing the mangroves would also mean losing their culture, their homes, and their source of food and income.

Tambillo, a community of 130 households and approximately 600 people, is the largest *custodia* in REMACAM (Warne, 2011). The ancestral users of this community rely mostly on fishing and cockle collecting as their source of income (Table 11.1, Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). The gendered division of these two activities determines that men are the fishers and about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the women are *concheras* (Warne, 2011). *Concheras*, cockle collectors, often need a large harvest in order to provide for large families. According to one *conchera* in Tambillo, women often have several male partners throughout their lives, but the "children from those relationships always stay with the woman" (Warne, 2011). The larger the family, the longer the days of cockle gathering in between caring for children, performing housework and other forms of domestic labor (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). According to Warne, the pressure to provide for one's family is so great that pregnant women will often work right up to when the baby is due, some have given birth on the wooden boats that transport *concheras* into the mangroves (Warne, 2011).

Due to the high dependence of cockle gathering in REMACAM communities (an average of 90 percent across the reserve), any further strains on *concheras* put entire families at a much greater risk of poverty (Table 11.1, Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). Potentially due to of shrimp-farm expansion, an increased percentage

of men have moved into the estuaries to collect cockles, having been forced out of areas typically reserved for fishing. This poses a problem not because they are men, but because the influx of displaced people becoming collectors stresses the already limited natural resources. Also, the itinerant collectors are often not coming from local communities that follow traditional and sustainable harvesting practices (Warne, 2011). They will cut the mangrove roots to make collecting easier, they often don't respect closed seasons, and refuse to leave behind juvenile cockles that are necessary to the replenishment of stocks (Ocampo-Thomason, 2006; Latorre, 2014).

Other than the challenges of availability of food supply in the mangroves, access has also become a threatening, if not fatal, issue. In the southern province of El Oro, and other parts of Ecuador as well, the buffer zones surrounding legal shrimp-farm operations have been deemed no trespassing zones to locals (Latorre, 2014). Guard dogs are sent on anyone who gets too close and armed security guards fire at trespassers. According to Latorre, “over the years, a number of deaths and disappearances have occurred in suspicious circumstances, the causes of which are presumed to be linked to the shrimp industry” (Latorre, 2014). In one incident, a cockle collector was killed when an attack dog was let loose on him (Warne, 2011). In 2008, a *conchero* was shot and killed by a guard on the border of a shrimp farm (Warne, 2011). The guard responsible said the man was stealing shrimp, but only cockles were found in the victim's possession. Though many have died, the goal is often to shoot to maim, thereby halting the process of gathering while also cutting off the family's food and support. The assumption is that collectors will eventually have to leave the mangroves. In small towns like Gauchal in the Esmeraldas, where there are a total of nine households, the loss of a single collector can prove disastrous to the entire community (Table 11.2, Ocampo-Thomason, 2006). The attacks are also gendered in that women are more often harassed by armed guards because of the

proximity of shrimp-farms to estuaries where women work (Veuthey, et al., 2012).

Despite the risks, collectors breach shrimp-farm boundaries to collect food as their access to resources continues to decrease. Mangrove communities across Ecuador are joining together to continue to collect food in the ways that they have for generations. According to Latorre, there is a strengthening “sense of belonging among mangrove gatherers in opposition to the others (shrimp-farm owners)” (Latorre, 2014). They are determined to resist rather than flee their home.

Similarly, the *cangrejeros*, crab collectors, operating out of the mangroves of Huaquillas in the El Oro province are also an example of a local resistance movement. They not only oppose the deforestation of mangroves, but the loss of local access to mangrove areas as well. A motto for the group of *cangrejeros* is *El manglar es nuestra casa. Protégelo y nos alimentará* [The mangrove is our home. Protect it and it will feed us] (Warne, 2011). Pedro Ordinola, the founder of the environmental group of *cangrejeros*, has received death threats and bribes, and he is not the only one (Warne, 2011). Many outspoken opponents of the shrimp farms have been threatened, sometimes forcing them and their families into hiding in the mountains (Warne, 2011). Despite the monopoly that the shrimp industry holds on the liberation of mangroves and its resources, activists have refused to back down. According to Warne, “Money talks, but it doesn't drown out the voice of those who have been killed or maimed for asserting their right to make a living” (Warne, 2011).

### **Food as Resistance and Grassroots Movements to Reverse Mangrove Destruction**

On the morning of July 26, 1998, several hundred people from the west Esmeraldas province gathered at the site of an illegal shrimp farm (Warne, 2011). Using whatever tools they had, including their bare hands, the crowd dismantled the pond wall, letting the shrimp pour into the sea. They then planted mangrove

seedlings in the empty pond basin (Warne, 2011). This was the first time such a concerted, visible act of resistance was organized against the shrimp farms in Ecuador. The participants were made up of local activists, mangrove defense organization members, and the fishers and gatherers themselves. This collective action made a number of key statements, 1) it was a denouncement of the government's unwillingness to act on illegal shrimp-farming operations, 2) by dumping the illegal food product into the open sea, they were depriving the shrimp-farm of its profitability – a retaliation against the shrimp-farms attacking the environment and the ancestral users of the mangroves – and 3) planting the mangrove seedlings stood as a symbol of the collectors' livelihood. July 26, 1998 was a historic day for mangrove activists around the world and is now known as the International Day of Mangroves.

Though this act of resistance took more drastic measures to convey opposition to the shrimp farms, every day forms of resistance have continued in the years since the protest. The work of grassroots organizations like FUNDECOL have “aimed at increasing power over the mangrove common-pool resources” as a more collective defense against mangrove destruction (Latorre, et al., 2014). Despite the challenges, the efforts of ancestral people to engage in traditional gathering and fishing practices have led to a strengthened sense of belonging within mangrove communities. This contributes to the argument that food is used as a means of disrupting the control that the shrimp-farm industry has over the mangroves and the people who rely on it for their livelihood.

### Conclusion

In Ecuador's coastal communities, there is a collective “livelihood identity” that supports grassroots social movements in their mission to prevent mangrove deforestation. Ancestral mangrove people have united to overcome shrimp industry giants that have subordinated and nearly destroyed “a cultural way of living with nature” (Latorre, 2014). Through the use of

food as both a means and a symbol of livelihood, mangrove gatherers and fishers have articulated their resistance against the shrimp-farm industry and the Ecuadorian governmental policies that enable it. Furthermore, they have pushed for collective land rights as a population heavily dependent on mangrove resources. Even as the shrimp-farm industry has expanded into the far reaches of Ecuador's mangroves, the people have asserted their ‘livelihood identity,’ and in the process, motivated social movements that prioritize mangrove culture over monoculture.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>According to testimonies of mangrove activists, ‘Ancestral Mangrove People’ is a more comprehensive term than ‘indigenous’ because it is not “necessarily or exclusively related to a native status. Elements such as the defense of the mangroves (against the shrimp farmers) and the adoption of environmentally sustainable practices and uses play a more determinant role in choosing who is included or excluded from this political category” (Latorre, 2014). Therefore, mangrove inhabitants are referred to throughout this paper as ‘ancestral mangrove people’.

<sup>2</sup>C-CONDEM is a collection of associations and grassroots communities of traditional gatherers and artisanal fishers, as well as environmental and social NGOs that have formed an interconnected network to resist mangrove destruction at the hands of the shrimp-farm industry (Yépez, 2008).

<sup>3</sup>The Mangrove Action Project is a nonprofit organization with an approach focused on education, networking, advocacy, and research. They have partners around the world and release regular reports on the status of mangroves from Asia to Latin America. For more won MAP, visit <http://mangroveactionproject.org/>

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