

Painting the diversity of mangroves

Mangroves sustain fish stocks, protect the ecosystem and sustain livelihoods. Women from many mangrove-dependent communities met in Ecuador earlier this year to share their stories and dreams.

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'Mangroves employ those who no-one else can employ.

No company can produce what the mangrove gives us to enjoy

They guard so many species, species as many can be

Food in so much abundance, we never can have any need'

(The Mangroves are Ours by Reverside Castillo, Bolívar Muisne)

The island of Muisne in the Province of Esmeraldas, Ecuador, witnessed a unique gathering earlier this year, from 29 to 31 May 2009. More than 80 women shellfishers, crabbers, fishers, and oyster and clam gatherers met to share their experiences of life in the mangroves. Women from the mangrove areas met with others from REDMANGLAR International, from Colombia, Honduras, Mexico and Brazil. The three-day meeting captured the historical memory of the women who live in, and struggle to defend, mangrove ecosystems.

'My clamming work has helped me provide my kids with an education, so that they don't have to be like me, so that they can be better. I feel proud that my kids have got a way forward, thanks to my work as a clammer. I haven't left them like my mother left me, with no education', said Jacinta, delegate from Muisine canton, Esmeraldas Province, Ecuador, on the first day of the meeting. These words set off a fierce polemic amongst the participants. Some women appeared to be disconcerted by her words; others were in total agreement.

Julia, from Tumaco, Colombia, protested, 'I don't understand how you can love mangrove work so much and yet say that you don't want your kids to do it. We cannot turn our backs on what we are. We must teach our boys and girls to work hard because that makes them better people. It does matter whether or not they study but what is more important is to know how to work and how to work with honesty.'

The discussion picked up. It's because life in the mangroves is getting harder, said some; others agreed with Julia and said that mangrove work is

dignified, that they are proud to be crabbers and that their entire families, grandmothers down to grandchildren, are in the mangroves, daily.

We split up into groups, by provinces, for more focused discussions on the mangrove ecosystem – to hear each woman's story about her work, about her struggles to survive.

The words of the women painted a picture of the biodiversity of the mangroves, bringing vividly to life images of families working and children playing as the destruction of the mangroves continues. We dreamed collectively of how we would like life to be in the future. We became friends and met many other women like ourselves. Women from El Oro, in the South of Ecuador, felt that society, though it thrived on the labour of women like themselves, did not adequately appreciate the wonders of the mangroves. The mangroves were being run down by the powerful. 'We want to raise our voices so that we are heard and respected,' said the women, 'conserving what is ours, and through which we sustain our economies.'

Women from the Esmeraldas Province in the north of Ecuador work with a cigarette in their mouths. The smoke gets rid of mosquitoes as they gather shellfish in the mangroves.

'We women are suffering,' they said, 'because the mangroves are being destroyed and with that, the livelihoods of our children and our grandchildren are being destroyed too. We have been threatened and attacked. The shrimp farmers have shot us and set dogs on us to chase us out so that they can take over the heritage of the mangroves which is ours.'

But here we are, ready to give up our lives if necessary, because we were born here. Our history is here, our tales, our work, our food, our families and friends are all here. We dream of the day that our community will own the mangroves.'

In the province of Manabi in the central coast of Ecuador, women are struggling in two zones: in the estuary of the river Portoviejo and in the estuary of the river Chone.

'We used to be fisherwomen,' they said. 'We also used to engage in short cycle agriculture. When the shrimp came, we would begin collecting larvae for the laboratories but soon it was all over. Many of us now have no work; a few do, de-heading shrimps for the tanks, but it is hard, the pay is low, and it is not permanent.'

The women from Manabi described how in earlier times, the El Niño used to be a blessing because with it came an abundance of fish and the soil was renewed. 'But,' they lamented, 'ever since the mangroves have disappeared, whenever the El Niño strikes, everything is swamped, houses are lost and people have to leave the area.'

These women dream of the day when their mangroves will be restored to them. Until that day, they promise to march, to struggle, to win.

In Guayas on the south-central Ecuadorian coast, there is still a great diversity of fish, shrimp and molluscs, and large areas of mangroves are being protected by the communities. However, in certain places, like the island of Puná, shrimp farmers are felling the mangroves, and as a result, many shellfishers and crabbers have lost both their livelihood and their food security.

In Santa Elena, also on the south-central Ecuadorian coast, the mangroves have been heavily felled, but the coral reefs survive and some fish stocks are still available. The introduction of industrial fisheries, however, has put the future of traditional fishing communities under threat. The depletion of the mangroves, which are the breeding grounds for fish, is very worrying.



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The women of Santa Elena said, 'We want the shellfish back in the mangroves so that we too can make daily catches of 1,000 or 1,500 shells like our mothers and grandmothers used to, 20 years ago. We dream of the mangroves becoming healthy once more so that men continue to work there, so that we can make charcoal and mangrove wood houses.'

The final day of the meeting saw a wonderful act of restoration. The workshop participants reforested two hectares of mangroves in Casa Vieja in the parish of Bolívar. This area had been steadily destroyed by a shrimp farmer, whose illegal shrimp ponds occupy nearly fifty hectares of mangroves. Thereafter, the women petitioned Ecuador's Environment Minister to formally register the area in order to protect it and enable it to come to life once more.