

1. Overview

Shrimp, once regarded as a luxury food by most people, has become more affordable and available as demand for it steadily rises in the major consuming markets of Japan, the United States, and various European countries. But obscured by a thin veneer of delicacy and culinary refinement is a story of environmental destruction and social upheaval that few consumers know about. Much of the shrimp sold in restaurants and supermarkets today is produced on factory-style 'shrimp farms' which are causing devastating ecological damage and social disruption. Tropical coastal ecosystems that once provided habitats for an immeasurable diversity of flora and fauna, and life support for scores of millions of coastal inhabitants, have been turned over to the mono culture cropping of one high-value product for consumers in the United States, Europe and Japan. While landings of wild shrimp from capture fisheries have hovered around two million tons a year since the early 1980s, shrimp farms have sprung up along vast stretches of tropical coastlines of many developing countries where shrimp output exploded from under 84,000 tons in 1982 to more than 712,000 tons in 1995, a nine-fold increase. Today, more than one-quarter of the shrimp consumed worldwide is produced this way, and the proportion is predicted to rise to 50 percent as shrimp farming expands and wild catches from over fished shrimp fisheries decline. In the U.S., the world's leading shrimp consuming country, shrimp competes with tuna as the most popular seafood. The United States imports up to one-half of the total world production of farmed shrimp and restaurant chains such as Red Lobster, Bubba Gump, Shoneys, Long John Silvers and Sizzler build reputations and market share by selling shrimp to the millions of Americans who occasionally dine out. Indeed, Red Lobster alone sells almost five percent of

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the farmed shrimp produced worldwide. According to the President of ICEC Seafood Corporation, "Red Lobster's advertising of shrimp has stimulated all consumption and in

large part made possible the 250 percent increase in US shrimp consumption since the advent

of aqua culture". But the fact that 'ordinary' American, or European or Japanese consumers

can afford to eat more and more shrimp costs others, and the environment, dearly. The true

costs of markets for "all the shrimp you can eat" in America, Europe or Japan are being paid

by poorer people living in coastal areas in countries like India, Bangladesh, Thailand,

Honduras and Ecuador.

The 'overnight' wealth to be made in shrimp farming has attracted get-rich-quick developers

all along the marketing chain, from the 'farm gate' to the restaurant plate, but in its wake

lies unprecedented environmental destruction, pollution and social disruption. As the UN's

Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently characterized the shrimp farming situation

in its 1995 review of the state of world aqua culture:

"The inexorable global expansion of marine shrimp farming generated by market demand,

short-term gain and government support because of export earnings has brought with it

super-intensive systems, nomadic farmers, environmental and sociological disputes, water

quality and disease problems and crashes in the production of some countries." Modern shrimp farming has caused so many environmental problems and social impacts that an

increasing groundswell of social discontent has risen in Asia and Latin America - often

resulting in violent confrontation and, in some instances, the harassment and even murder of

local people who have attempted to defend their lives and livelihoods against encroachment

by shrimp farming.