

Global trade in tiger shrimp threatens environment

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The cultivation of shrimp and fish in tropical coastal areas is often described as an environmentally friendly way to alleviate poverty, but in fact this cultivation has negative consequences for both the local population and the environment. Daniel A. Bergquist of Uppsala University, Sweden, has studied how policies for sustainable development can go so wrong.

The cultivating of fish and shellfish in artificial ponds has increased dramatically in the last few decades, apace with the ever greater depletion of fish stocks in the oceans. International aid organizations, working with local governments, have made major commitments to expanding aquaculture in the hope that such activities would alleviate poverty and spur economic growth in these areas. But the Swedish human geographer Daniel A. Bergquist has shown, using Sri Lanka and the Philippines as examples, that a major portion of the local population is excluded from these activities and continue to be just as poor as ever.

“The winners are the local elites,” he says.

What’s more, aquaculture entails serious consequences for the environment. When mangrove forests are cut down to make way for shrimp and fish ponds, the ecosystem is affected. These environmental problems, in turn, impact aquaculture, and entire harvests can be lost.

A large part of the explanation for today’s situation, according to Daniel A. Bergquist, can be sought in the methods that are used to evaluate what

it really costs to cultivate shrimp and fish. These methods are faulty, leading to underestimations of the input from people and nature and therefore to excessively low prices. By using methods that factor in all costs, he is able to show, for instance, that the price of tiger shrimp would need to be more than five times higher than it is today for the environment and the local population to receive fair compensation for their input.

“One contributory factor is found in the faulty global market mechanisms that lead to growing inequities in the distribution of resources, profits, and costs between the northern and southern hemispheres. Aquaculture is a clear example of how the colonization of the southern hemisphere is still going on, finding new avenues via globalization and international trade,” says Daniel A. Bergquist.

His study also shows how it is possible to use alternative methods to bring to light this unfair and unsustainable exchange, through interdisciplinary analysis, comparison, and visualization of the situations in Sri Lanka and the Philippines.

Source: Uppsala University

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