

It is hard to imagine that shrimp – the most popular seafood in the United States – was once a delicacy reserved for Asian royalty. What was once a luxury item can now be consumed all-you-can-eat style at chain restaurants. A billion pounds of “white gold” worth about \$6 billion is produced each year.

How did this happen? It didn't occur overnight, but rampant changes in the shrimp aquaculture industry have made it seem so. Just as industrialization and globalization have made low-cost beef, poultry, fruit and vegetables available to much of the world, so have these trends made shrimp affordable to hundreds of millions of consumers worldwide – including the bulk of the U.S. population.

But, just as these trends have caused economic, environmental and social disaster in the Global South the Global North alike, so has the expansion of the global shrimp industry devastated many nations – particularly in Asia and Latin America.

The industrialized West hungers for a constant supply of shrimp, which has fallen in price to about \$10 a pound. When all things are considered, however, how low is the cost?



*Mangrove forest turned into shrimp flats in Ecuador*

“Consumers must be made aware that when they eat shrimp, they may be dining on a delicacy responsible for hunger, suffering and death,” said Steve Trent, director of the Environmental Justice Foundation.

## At the Environment's Expense

Mangroves are among the most important ecosystems on Earth. These tropical coastal forests support a tremendous variety of marine life; they support coral reefs and seagrass beds, which in turn support two-thirds of all fish caught in the world.

Stands of these unique trees are being hacked down to make room for shrimp farms. Nearly half of the loss of mangroves in the world has been attributed to shrimp farming.

As if this isn't bad enough, shrimp farms are only productive for a few years, leading the industry to constantly destroy more pristine coastal areas. In Thailand, one-fifth of shrimp farms in former mangrove areas are abandoned after two to four years.

Shrimp farms depend on staggering amounts of antibiotics, fungicides, algacides and pesticides, which pollute waters and harm other sealife. What's worse, local communities are robbed of drinking water sources by farms that pump in fresh water and pump out wastewater – a wretched cocktail of chemicals, fishmeal and shrimp feces. In Sri Lanka, three-fourths of the people who live in shrimp farming areas lack ready access to drinking water.

## Consumers' Health Pays

Disease can run amuck in shrimp farms. The industry's solution is to dump ton after ton of antibiotics to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses.

One such virus, White Spot, decimated farms throughout Asia and Central America in the 1990s. Even when the virus doesn't obliterate farms, it can survive freezing and make the trip from the farm to the plate.

One widely used antibiotic – chloramphenicol – is banned in the U.S. but is used by many countries that export shrimp. Unfortunately, the U.S. does not have a rigorous inspection program for imported shrimp, opening the possibility that consumers might be eating this substance.

Chloramphenicol has been linked to human aplastic anemia (a lethal blood disorder), intestinal problems, neurological reactions and other health effects. Disturbingly, scientists do not understand the process by which chloramphenicol can make people sick.

## The Human Costs

Local communities throughout the world depend on mangroves for their survival. Women gather shellfish, mussels, crabs and other seafood to feed their families and sell in local markets. Fishermen gain access to the sea through mangroves – access that is destroyed when shrimp farms are built.

With nowhere else to turn, people resort to collecting shrimp feed, harvesting the crop or processing shrimp for export. Plants resemble sweatshops, with dangerous working conditions, low pay, physical abuse and child labor. Land for farms is often seized outright.

Some who have protested the expansion of the shrimp aquaculture industry have been murdered.

Further, rice paddies are commonly converted to shrimp farms. In Thailand, half of shrimp farms are believed to have once been rice fields. Once salinated, the land cannot revert to rice growing.

Coastal communities in the U.S. also suffer. American shrimpers cannot compete with the flood of cheap shrimp imports. Every year, droves of shrimpers are forced to sell their boats and look for land-based jobs, when all they know is the sea. From 2000 to 2002, U.S. shrimp production fell by more than 50 percent. Nearly 90 percent of the shrimp consumed in the U.S. is imported.



*Ecuadorian woman impacted by shrimp farming*

## The Price of Global Trade

The march of the global shrimp aquaculture industry is following the path of the greater food industry.

International development institutions such as the World Bank are bankrolling the conversion and privatization of coastal areas to the detriment of the environment and citizens. Dozens of countries are taking the bait, mainly the Asian countries of Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam, and the Latin American countries of Brazil, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico.

International food supply systems continue to widen the gap between the rich and the poor, while local and regional economies are ripped to shreds by multinational corporations that benefit at their expense. As food is shipped globally, small-scale local fishermen watch their culture and livelihoods vanish.



All this for \$9.99 per pound

### Quick Facts About Farmed Shrimp

- Top producers of farmed shrimp: China, India, Mexico, Thailand, Vietnam
- Top Importers of farmed shrimp: U.S., E.U. and Japan
- Top seafood choice in the U.S.: Shrimp
- Nearly 90 percent of the shrimp consumed in the U.S. is imported
- Top shrimp producers use chemicals banned in the U.S.
- It can take 3 pounds of wild fish to feed 1 pound of marketed shrimp

## What You Can Do!

- Do not buy farm-raised shrimp.
- Talk to your seafood grocer about the costs of farm-raised shrimp.
- Ask for local or U.S. "pot caught" shrimp.
- Support local fishermen and local seafood.
- Go to [www.shrimpactivist.org](http://www.shrimpactivist.org) to send letters to protect your health and to restrict shrimp imports!



## GET INVOLVED!

Visit our website at  
[www.foodactivist.org](http://www.foodactivist.org),  
send an e-mail to  
[cmep@citizen.org](mailto:cmep@citizen.org),  
or call us at  
202-546-4996

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# Shrimp Aquaculture

## The True Costs of the Devastating Delicacy



Is it Really Worth It?