

NATIONAL FISHWORKERS' FORUM (NFF)

(A Federation of State Level Trade Unions in India)

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Shri Jairam Ramesh
Minister of State for Environment and Forests
Paryavaran Bhavan
CGO Complex, Lodhi Road
New Delhi - 110 003.

14 August 2009

Dear Shri Ramesh,

Subject: Livelihood rights of fishing communities in coastal areas

We would like to thank you for initiating consultations with fishing communities, to discuss how the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification of 1991 can be improved and implemented, also taking note of the recommendations contained in the Report of the Expert Committee on the review of the draft Coastal Management Zone (CMZ), “The Last Frontier”.

The proposals by the National Campaign for Protection of the Coast, of which NFF is a member, have already been put forward, and we hope that they will be taken seriously.

The National Fishworkers' Forum (NFF) would additionally like to stress the critical importance of recognizing and protecting livelihoods rights of coastal fishing communities. In this context, **it is essential that livelihood rights that have been curtailed or taken away, in the name of conservation, as in Jambudwip, West Bengal, Gahirmatha (Marine) Wildlife Sanctuary, Orissa, and Gulf of Mannar National Park, Tamil Nadu, are urgently restored.**

The Report of the Expert Committee on the review of the draft Coastal Management Zone (CMZ), “The Last Frontier”, has also drawn attention to this issues, Highlighting highlighting the particular cases of Jambudwip (as attached), and the Gahirmatha sanctuary in Orissa.

Necessary amendment must be introduced in the Wild Life (Protection) Act and the Forest Conservation Act to recognize and protect the livelihood rights of fishing communities.

We sincerely hope your Ministry can take appropriate action on this issue.

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Box 4: Jambudwip: conservation without people

Jambudwip island is a tiny dot in the Bay of Bengal. A few years ago, it hit headlines when wildlife activists dragged fishermen, who used the landmass to dry their fish, to the Supreme Court. A case was filed regarding 'encroachment' of this island, partly covered by mangroves. The apex court's central empowered committee (cec), which advises it in all forest matters in its report to the court contended that fish drying was a non-forest activity, so disallowed under the Forest Conservation Act (1980).

The fishermen appealed. They had to go out into the open sea for days, putting life on hold and everything they had at risk. Jambudwip was a convenient transit camp; they used this nearest landmass, with a natural harbour, only to dry fish. They had no refrigeration facilities; this was the only way they could preserve fish for sale in the mainland. Their practices were sustainable — fishing nets were handcrafted to catch only the adult fish, leaving the small to the sea. They used the sun to dry fish. They took from nature only what they needed.

The fishers also explained that their use was not destructive to the ecology of the island, and, in fact, it was in their best interest to protect the mangroves as a buffer to the harsh sea. The permits and payments made to the forest department showed the island was in use from 1950. Destruction to the mangroves was marginal – satellite imagery confirmed the island had, over these long years of use, lost only 200 ha of forest, out of its 2,000 ha. The fishermen also put forward a plan – use the money we pay for permits to the forest department to plant mangroves; create a sustainable management plan for the island; restrict boat numbers.

But these pleas were unheard. The fishers were disallowed from using the island in the future and stroke, the livelihood of over 10,000 people engaged in fishing, drying, transporting and selling fish ended. Conservation in this case made enemies, not friends.

(From the Last Frontier, page 23)

Yours Sincerely

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14-08-2009

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