

Shifting Undercurrents - Women Sea weed collectors of Gulf of Mannar

This is based on the livelihood of women seaweed collector. The 5000-odd women who free-dive to collect seaweed in the Gulf of Mannar Marine National park of the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu find themselves struggling for their livelihood now that their activities have been greatly curtailed.

The Gulf of Mannar was declared a marine national park in 1986 under India's Wildlife (Protection) Act (WLPA) of 1972, under which resource extraction from national parks is taboo. Since 2000, seaweed collectors and fishers have borne the brunt of the Forest Department's zeal to implement the law. Despite large-sale industrial pollution, overfishing by mechanized vessels and commercial cultivation of exotic seaweed species, enforcement efforts primarily target the small scale livelihood activities of local communities.

Sadly, the women's effort to self regulate their activities to minimize the impacts on corals have not been recognized or supported, and they are still treated as 'thieves'. Though the government has mooted other livelihood options, the fishing community is not convinced that these are viable.

This film raises several crucial issues. Is it appropriate to use a terrestrial framework like the WLPA to conserve a very different ecosystem, namely, the marine ecosystem? How can the customary fishing rights of fishing communities be recognized and protected? What legal framework will allow for the meaningful participation of fishing communities in the governance of the national park? How can better co-ordination between the Forest Department and others such as the Fisheries Department, be ensured?

The many-sided discussion and continued struggles depicted in the film shed light on the shifting undercurrents of the women's efforts to gain respect for their profession.