

research snapshot

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Shrimp farmers in Thailand need to be involved in regulating their industry.



What is this research about?

Shrimp farming has become a major global industry over the past two decades. At the same time, there has been a debate about how to best control the impact of shrimp farming on the environment. In the past, it was assumed that a central government should be responsible for protecting the environment. Nowadays, however, governments have less power to regulate the behavior of industries. As a result, the role of environmental regulatory networks (ERNs) has grown. The model of the ERN gives us a new, more complex way to think about the process of regulation. ERNs are made up of multiple players with shifting interests, including the private sector, NGOs, government agencies, and communities.

In Southern Thailand, concerns over the impact of shrimp farming on the environment have led to the creation of two very distinct kinds of ERN. One is based on certification. The other is based on local, community based natural resource management (CBNRM). A certification network can include industry players, NGOs, research institutions, and others. Its goal is to certify food commodities, such as shrimp, so that they meet certain standards of quality. However, a certification network can impose technical standards that are too rigid. It can also exclude local stakeholders, such as the very coastal communities where shrimp farms are located. A CBNRM network, on the other hand,

What you need to know:

In Southern Thailand, certification efforts would be more effective if they worked with local residents, communities, and governments who are currently the most effective regulators of shrimp farming.

works to mobilize local communities. This allows the communities to take a role in managing their natural resources. But which of these approaches to the regulation of shrimp farming in Southern Thailand is the most effective?

What did the researcher do?

Between 2001 and 2002, Professor Peter Vandergeest, York University, looked at two different kinds of ERN in Southern Thailand. With the help of an assistant, he interviewed 20 farmers in 11 tambons. (A tambon is basically a subdistrict.) The 11 tambons bordered Songkla Lake, where shrimp farming is an important industry. He also interviewed local residents and officials to get a full sense of how shrimp farmers in Southern Thailand experience regulation.

What did the researcher find?

Although the results can be mixed, local communities and local governments *can* act together to regulate shrimp farming in Southern

Thailand, especially with the support of the national and provincial governments. Local NGOs can help to bring about this collective action (and tend to do so in an indirect way). However, the researcher found that the effectiveness of collective actions will vary from place to place because different environments face different challenges. He also found that it is difficult to separate out the actions of a community from those of the state. In short, the most effective regulation of shrimp farming happens when local communities and governments work together.

The influence of certification networks on shrimp farming is growing. But these networks take a pretty standard approach when dealing with local communities and governments. And the standards they set are all framed in technical terms. They do not allow for the input of the community. In other words, shrimp farmers are shut out of the certification process – a process that affects their livelihood. So are local residents, communities, and governments, who so far have been the most effective in regulating shrimp farms.

How can you use this research?

Many NGOs have already used this research to argue for more community involvement in the regulation of shrimp farmers. Policymakers should note that the best approach to regulating the shrimp farming industry is one that involves local residents, communities, and governments. Certification networks could be more effective if they took a page from community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). They need to be more flexible and open. They need to allow communities to help shape the regulation that will affect them.

At present, there is not much research on the community-based regulation of shrimp farming. More research will reinforce a conclusion that

has already been made by the World Bank and other researchers: communities can benefit from shrimp farming when they participate in regulatory action.

About the Researcher

Peter Vandergeest is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at York University. This Research Snapshot is from his study, “Certification and Communities: Alternatives for Regulating the Environmental and Social Impacts of Shrimp Farming.” It originally appeared in *World Development* 35.7 (2007): 1152-71.

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