

Once thought smelly and unproductive, these plants are becoming the sea's princes

St John's, Nfld, October 24, 2007-They thrive in muddy, smelly salt-water swamps and were once considered a noxious and impenetrable breeding ground of disease. They like salt; unlike most plants and in some species their roots shoot above rather than dive underground. They are called mangroves, and they have more to do with helping than hindering mankind, Anuradha Rao, a Global Youth Fellow of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation discovered on her trip to Ghana.

"Before going to Ghana I knew mangroves saved people from dying when the tsunami struck Asian coastal villages and towns in 2004. However I didn't know until I went to Ghana how integrated these plants are into people's lives, what hidden values they have and how much their survival is directly linked to the communities around them," says Rao.

In Ghana, mangrove forests that inhabit various parts of this West African nation's 758-kilometre long coastline provide a habitat for fish and shellfish to thrive and are a source of medicines, building materials and dyes for nearby communities. Mangroves also provide a habitat for birds and other wildlife. While visiting Nsuekyir Village in Winneba town last summer, Rao heard stories of the mangrove forests' magic.

"A storm this year caused havoc in the village especially where there was a break in the mangroves," says Development Chief Joseph Obir Taylor. "My own wall, which I constructed about 8 months before the storm, was broken down from the direction where the mangrove break occurred. In the areas behind the mangroves, there was no problem."

Like many tropical and sub-tropical countries around the globe, Ghana is beginning to acknowledge the importance of mangroves to the ecosystem and the protection these sea forests provide against fierce storms or earthquake triggered tsunamis. However, while some governments have been shocked into making mangroves the new princes of environmental conservation, mangrove forests worldwide remain threatened.

"Humans are destroying mangrove habitats because of over harvesting, too much coastal development and shrimp farming," say Rao. "This means they are destroying those natural barriers that could protect them from tsunamis and the effects of global warming, such as sea level rise and stronger, more frequent storms."

"Countries with large coastal areas need to focus on protecting them. From what I've seen, however, organizations in Canada and Ghana working on conservation and restoration of coastal ecosystems often struggle to get funding for their work. Canada should develop connections with, and support the efforts of, communities and organizations at home and abroad that are working on coastal ecosystem conservation and restoration. This support could come in the form of a dedicated fund," says Rao.

Mangroves once covered 75% of tropical and subtropical coastlines, but less than 50% of this remains and half of the remainder is degraded.

About Anuradha (Anu) Rao

Anuradha Rao has extensive experience as a global activist mostly in the area of conservation and human rights. Rao, who launched the Sierra Youth Coalition Sustainable Campuses project in 1999 is a 2006 Global Youth Fellow of the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation.

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