

## REVIEW

## Shifting Undercurrents: Seaweed Collectors of Gulf of Mannar, Tamil Nadu

2012. 20 min. Directed by Rita Banerji.  
English and Tamil

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Produced by ICSF, the 20-minute documentary *Shifting Undercurrents* explores the trials and tribulations of a community of seaweed collectors in India struggling to retain access to seaweed resources within a marine protected area. The film won the second prize at the 9th Annual Jeevika: Asia Livelihood Documentary Festival in 2012.

Spread over 560 sq km and consisting of 21 uninhabited islands off the coast of the south Indian State of Tamil Nadu, the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park is home to about 5,000 women who rely on the park's natural resources for their livelihood. Each morning, these women head out to sea where they spend up to four hours free-diving to collect seaweed. Using minimal equipment and relying on their inherent skills, they hand-pick selected species of wild seaweed, which finds great demand in local markets.

Seaweed collection has sustained the lives of these women and their families for several generations. But now they find themselves struggling to cling on to their primary source of livelihood in the face of a slew of legally mandated resource-management and conservation restrictions. This film tries to understand the various dimensions of the intensifying struggle.

The Gulf of Mannar was declared a national park in 1986 under India's Wildlife

(Protection) Act (WLPA) of 1972, which bans resource extraction from national parks. Since the year 2000, seaweed collectors and fishers have borne the brunt of the Forest Department's implementation of the law. Although the park's resources face several major threats, such as large-scale industrial pollution, overfishing by mechanized vessels and the commercial cultivation of exotic seaweed species, enforcement efforts target primarily the small-scale livelihood activities of local communities.

Ironically, it is the government that promoted seaweed collection as an income-generating activity in the 1960s, an activity it has declared illegal today. What are the arguments being used to penalize seaweed collection and how much truth do they carry? Are the self-regulatory activities of the fishing communities being recognized or ignored by the government? What alternative livelihood sources are being offered and how viable are they? This film explores all these critical issues and also raises other important questions that have larger policy implications.

Is it appropriate to use an essentially 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 discussions and continued struggles depicted in the film shed important light on the shifting undercurrents of the women's efforts to seek recognition and respect for their source of livelihood. **Y**



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Writers and potential contributors to YEMAYA, please note that write-ups should be brief, about 500 words. They could deal with issues that are of direct relevance to women and men of fishing communities. They could also focus on recent research or on meetings and workshops that have raised gender issues in fisheries. Also welcome are life stories of women and men of fishing communities working towards a sustainable

fishery or for a recognition of their work within the fishery. Please also include a one-line biographical note on the writer.

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