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**DEVELOPMENT: Aquaculture Awaits Its Heyday**

By Stephen Leahy\*

**SAN DIEGO, U.S., Feb 16 (Tierramérica) - With wild fish catches in sharp decline, aquaculture, which now accounts for nearly half of all seafood consumed, is expected to double production over the next two decades.**

"Aquaculture is the future... [It] will be a major industry in the (developing) South and will be a major source of employment and income, replacing wild catch in terms of importance," according to Jason Clay, a scientist with the U.S. branch of the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF).

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) predicts that per capita seafood consumption will increase 1.5 kilograms in the coming two decades, Clay told the nearly 500 participants in the recent Seafood Summit, held in the U.S. Pacific coast city of San Diego.

The international meet earlier this month, organised by Seafood Choices Alliance, gave fishers, fish farmers, multinational seafood corporations and seafood buyers a chance to mix with conservationists and scientists to debate - and attempt to find common ground about - the question: Can aquaculture be environmentally and socially responsible?

"We have to stop assigning blame and drop competitive and confrontational attitudes," said Michael Boots, vice-president for sustainable markets at SeaWeb. "We need new thinking and new partnerships," he stressed.

SeaWeb is a U.S.-based non-governmental organisation that hosts the annual conference as part of its mandate to raise awareness of the growing threats to the ocean and its living resources.

The industry faces enormous challenges, not least of which is finding the feed needed for aquaculture operations. Currently, one third of the global wild catch is for fishmeal and oil, most of which goes to aquaculture.

One solution is to be more efficient. Salmon require up to five kilograms of feed for every kg of fish produced. "In Mexico there are shrimp operations that only need 1.3 kg of feed to produce 1.0 kg of shrimp," Clay said.

That is better than land-based animal protein production. "Beef requires 10 kilos of feed to produce a kilo," he pointed out.

However, the industry can't grow using wild-caught feed. Land-based sources are needed, as are improvements in aquaculture, so that the industry can become a net producer of fishmeal one day, he says.

Aquaculture is also moving to the open sea to prevent some of the pollution issues found with many near-shore operations.

One such operation, Kona Blue Water Farms, grows a local deep-water fish called kamapchi (*Seriola rivoliana*) offshore in submersible net pens in waters that are 60 metres deep in the U.S. Pacific island state of Hawaii.

On salmon farms, leftover feed and faeces kills everything underneath the net pens and fouls nearby water, but with better monitoring of feed and locating the Kona Blue pens nearly a kilometre off shore - in deeper water with strong currents - has overcome these problems, says Kona Blue's Neil Anthony Sims.

"There is a coral reef nearby that is carefully monitored and there have been no problems," Sims told Tierramérica in an interview.

Canadian scientist Thierry Chopin, of the University of New Brunswick, is working with the salmon industry to reduce its impact and improve profitability by farming shellfish and seaweed in a type of "ocean polyculture".

Off the coast of New Brunswick, salmon net pens are surrounded by a vertical wall of blue mussels and then another wall of kelp. The mussels filter about 50 percent of effluent particles coming from the salmon, and the seaweed thrives on the high levels of nutrients in the water column, absorbing about 40 percent, Chopin explained.

"We have eight years of data showing that the mussels and seaweed do not have any of the antibiotics or pesticides that are used in the growing of salmon," he added.

Also effective in cleaning the water, Chopin says bottom fish, sea urchins or sea cucumbers will be needed below the nets to complete what he calls an integrated multi-trophic aquaculture system.

Shrimp farming may have an even worse reputation than salmon in many parts of the developing South. But farming prawns, or shrimp, can be done sustainably, says Hector Luis Corrales, of the Honduran Grupo Granjas Marinas, S.A. (GGM).

With 6,500 hectares of shrimp farms and state-of-the-art processing facilities in Honduras, GGM is one of the world's largest fully integrated shrimp operations in the world.



Salmon farms in New Brunswick, Canada, on the Atlantic Ocean.

Credit:Photo Stock

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"We work with local communities, consult with them, form partnerships and help them," Corrales told Tierramérica.

The company provides funding, equipment and expertise to help bring benefits to communities such as drinking water system and road improvements, health clinics and schools, according to the executive.

After many years of media reports about the destruction wrought by shrimp farms in many parts of the world, some large seafood retailers conduct their own audits of GGM operations.

"Our customers (mainly in Europe) look for social responsibility before they look at our price," though it is not possible to satisfy everyone Corrales acknowledges.

"There are local NGOs who don't like everything we do, but our clients are satisfied," he said.

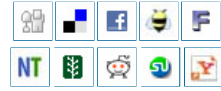
(\*This story was originally published by Latin American newspapers that are part of the Tierramérica network. Tierramérica is a specialised news service produced by IPS with the backing of the United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Environment Programme and the World Bank.)

(END/2009)

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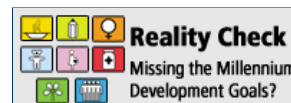
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