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The Economic Advantages of Aquaculture

By Todd Corayer

Depending on how you work the numbers, this country is carrying the weight of at least a \$7 billion seafood deficit. Imports are driving many markets as they stall others. Environmental groups and their eager attorneys are pacing court house halls waiting for a chance to stop our boats until capture levels are reduced or eliminated. New retirees and the new rich are increasingly drawn to the vista of the cute seaside working towns and then quickly work to alter the definition of "working."

Perched on fertilized lawns, above the ISDS (which leach down-stream, contributing to nitrogen loading and decreased water quality), the push is made to take away the working waterfront because what we all really need is more shops and condos. The coastal feature is changing quickly to accommodate current trends and the teller machine drug that is tourism. The very people who define the small town fabric and who rely on the commercial support system of the harbor are being left behind. Meanwhile, the FAO has reported that wild capture fisheries have reached their maximum production and indicates there may be "a marked decrease in global capture production, to about 92 million tones".

This can be pretty sobering stuff for fishermen but in the midst of all this is the economic advantage of marine aquatic farming. Aquaculture is a job opportunity which requires traditional skills, the preservation of access to real working waterfronts and one which will preserve the most important of traditions: the opportunity for our children to work on the water. Aquaculture does not mean just salmon; it means oysters, clams, scallops, codfish, baitfish, seaweeds and more. It is supplying researchers working with nutraceutical and medical products and is the fastest growing segment of agriculture in the US and now accounts for almost one third of global seafood production. Aquaculture, a serious economic contributor, is working with other users and fisheries to be profitable and sustainable.

What does this mean to wild harvest fishermen? It means an opportunity to develop a profitable resource on the water as an alternative or an addition to what you know best. It is an opportunity for this and future generations to responsibly harvest aquatic plants and animals while contributing to the local stocks. Aquaculture is employment not meant to displace but to enhance. As marine farming is increasing in acreage and harvest value, the FAO reports that, "Aquaculture is growing more rapidly than all other animal food producing sectors."

The message here is clear: harvests have peaked, today's ocean is not the endless producer of old and responsible marine aquaculture may be the key to strong, consistent harvests.

To address over-crowded shorelines and a shrinking resource of available plankton-rich bays, the next step will be to sight farms offshore, in areas with fewer user conflicts. The first to engineer the deep-water farms will lead farmers into new areas of high feed productivity, which do not interfere with other fishermen, for the culturing of mussels, scallops, codfish halibut and more.

Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution has experimented successfully with a submerged mussel farm in Rhode Island Sound and completed a thorough economic evaluation of mussel farming as a blueprint for farmers and investors. Hopefully Mr. Hogarth and the federal government will recognize the serious economic potential of offshore aquaculture and help encourage new recruits and lenders.

One thing farming (or fishing) should not be is a whipping post for old-boy funded environmentalists who want to control every aspect of our ocean and its bounty. The salmon folks have suffered from well-funded media campaigns encouraging chef organizations to keep busy by waving the red flag against whatever fish is currently unfashionable and for customers to consult wallet guides before making seafood purchases. We all need to stay on top of groups like SeaWeb and the many-tentacled Pew Foundation, who have repeatedly worked in earnest to shape the public's understanding of fishermen and farmers to their suiting.

Much of what we endure from them is biased and poorly researched but makes headlines nonetheless, and nobody reads corrections. Responsibility in our work and lives, whether fishing for fun or profit or working a lease should be our primary focus and that is not something we need to be told when forced into the courtroom.

Marine aquaculture is also not the elixir for the mistakes or misguided regulations of the past but it is a real and important business option to feed people, earn a profit and have a net benefit on the environment. Responsible aquaculture is finding a place in the working waterfront and in conjunction with the skills native to good fishermen and with respect to the water's other users, can bring about real economic stimulation and begin to reverse that unnecessary deficit.

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