

Certifying the Uncertifiable?

An Expert Workshop on Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification, organized in Fortaleza, Brazil, from 31 July to 3 August 2007, examined the gamut of issues surrounding intensive industrial aquaculture

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A recent joint initiative of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific (NACA) and the Government of Brazil (through its Fisheries Secretariat) sought to open up a discussion on guidelines for aquaculture certification, with a particular focus on the Americas. This took the concrete form of an Expert Workshop on Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification, organized in Fortaleza, Brazil, from 31 July to 3 August 2007.

It was the second such workshop on the subject, under the December 2006

According to Rohana Subasinghe, responsible for the implementation of these workshops, “The certification guidelines are aimed at all types of aquaculture in a more generic manner. And the (Brazil) workshop will discuss various aspects of aquaculture (all types, species and practices) that have a relevance to certification.”

The Brazil workshop, therefore, seemed like a good opportunity to air in a public international forum the concerns raised by the critics of industrial aquaculture, particularly in Latin America. There are serious misgivings in Latin America about the opportunity costs of developing intensive aquaculture, particularly where significant government subsidies may be provided. This is summed up by Juan Carlos Cardenas, Director of Ecoceanos, a Chilean non-governmental organization (NGO), who emphasizes: “We also need to look at alternatives for aquaculture development that could be instrumental in developing a more democratic and decentralized society that is socially just, environmentally sustainable and culturally diverse.”

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mandate given to the FAO Committee on Fisheries (COFI) Sub-committee on Aquaculture “to convene an Expert Consultation and/or workshops which would assist in elaborating norms and reviewing the diverse options and relative benefits of these approaches.” The reason given for convening such a consultation was “the emergence of a wide range of certification schemes and accreditation bodies” that were “creating confusion amongst producers and consumers alike”.

Environmental crimes

Industrial aquaculture certainly has its detractors, who accuse it of the worst kinds of environmental crimes and anti-social behaviour. They claim its practices are the antithesis of sustainable development, with profits and other benefits being offshored,

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and social and environmental costs externalized. Industrial aquaculture leaves in its wake an ecological footprint that is both heavy and indelible, and aquatic commons in ruin, local communities abused and displaced, and human rights violated.

Sensitive to such criticism, in recent years, the aquaculture industry and its supporters have tried to clean up their image. The Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) is one such high-profile initiative aimed at substantiating the industry's claims of environmentally and socially responsible aquaculture. The FAO, the World Bank (WB) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) have played key roles in supporting these endeavours. Support initiatives include the Consortium on Shrimp Farming and the Environment (The Consortium) and the Aquaculture Dialogues promoted by the WWF.

The Consortium members include FAO, NACA, the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities of the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP/GPA), WB and WWF. Founded in 1999, it has pioneered the development of International Principles for Responsible Shrimp Farming. But many NGOs have been cautious to embrace this initiative, which they see largely as 'greenwash'. When the WB, a Consortium Member, awarded itself and others in the Consortium its Green Award in 2006, it confirmed the NGOs' suspicions, and created even greater scepticism about the virtue of the Consortium as an impartial judge of industrial aquaculture practices.

Organic farming, fair trade and responsible consumerism have long and respected histories in several countries. But in recent years, these concepts have been poached by the commercial sector. The labelling of products as 'green' or derived from 'fair trade' or 'sustainable sources' has become a commercial tool for developing niche markets and for presenting a green and pleasant image to attract customers by the food industry and retail business, especially supermarkets.

The certification of fish and fishery products is a relatively recent phenomenon, especially for aquaculture. In

the case of organic labelling of aquaculture products, NGOs are highly divided. WWF, for example, "collaborates with a range of stakeholders to develop credible, voluntary standards geared toward minimizing or eliminating the main environmental and social impacts caused by aquaculture". In this regard, they have initiated several roundtables—called 'Dialogues'—in collaboration with producers, buyers, non-profit organizations and other stakeholders. There are five such 'Aquaculture Dialogues' currently in process, namely, for shrimp, tilapia, molluscs, pangasius and salmon. Once these processes have reached maturity, performance-based standards will be developed for certifying aquaculture. Such standards will then be passed on to new or existing certification organizations, possibly through processes akin to the setting up of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) by WWF and the multinational food giant, Unilever.

Aquaculture certification

On the other side of the fence, Redmanglar International, a Latin American network of NGOs founded in 2001 in Honduras with members in 10 countries, has been highly critical of aquaculture certification schemes. They have issued several strong

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Aerial shot of shrimp farms on the east coast of the Gulf of Thailand

statements to the effect that “shrimp farming certification schemes currently being proposed...do not guarantee an ecologically and socially responsible activity” (2003); and that “current certification schemes will not help to address the massive environmental and severe social impacts caused by the shrimp industry...they may, in fact, legitimize past and current injustices and even lead to further expansion” (2006).

In this particular case, their opposition was sparked off by a GTZ (German Technical Co-operation)-backed initiative implemented by the certifying company, Naturland, in Ecuador. How could such a foreign company consider certifying shrimps as organic when they were produced by companies that had illegally occupied land, cleared mangroves (an offence in Ecuador), degraded the environment, and carried out no environmental or social-impact studies, they demanded.

On average, shrimp-farm workers are paid monthly wages of US\$100 or less, and often, this wage covers the work of entire families who put in 10 to 15 hours each day. In 2006, the basic monthly above-poverty-line earning level for a family of five was around US\$450, with minimum salary levels of around US\$180. These figures are taken from a recent Redmanglar report, published in 2007, in Spanish, titled “Certifying Destruction: An Analysis of the Organic Certification of Industrial Shrimp Aquaculture in Ecuador”, which takes a particularly hard look at this dirty business.

Prior to the Fortaleza workshop, NGOs and others raised some serious questions about whether the workshop process was in fact, open to “foster-

Latin American participants, particularly those from Brazil, complained of being linguistically excluded by the dominant use of English, and the lack of any briefing documentation in either Spanish or Portuguese. Finally, agreement was reached that simultaneous English-Spanish interpretation would be provided for the plenary sessions of the workshop, a concession warmly welcomed by all concerned. In addition, thanks to AVINA support, Instituto Terramar, a Brazilian NGO, translated various relevant FAO documents into Portuguese.

With support from AVINA, Instituto Terramar hosted a pre-workshop preparation meeting in Prainha do Canto Verde on 29 July 2007. This preparatory workshop, where the main participants were Brazilian NGOs, drafted a letter to be distributed during the Expert Workshop in Fortaleza, voicing their concerns. The letter was circulated widely to organizations in Brazil and around the world. The letter reflects the strong misgivings and frustrations of participants, who declared, on the eve of the workshop: “From our perspective, shrimp farming represents a profound damage to society and the environment, and this proposal of certification is an attempt to legitimise, in watersheds and coastal ecosystems, an activity that is not viable.”

Participants from the Prainha preparatory meet presented themselves to the FAO as being open to dialogue, but that, in their view, the certification process had severe limitations. They were also concerned that the recent history of degradation by the aquaculture industry should not be legitimized through certification.

Presentation

Soraya Vanini Tupinaba, representing the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF), was invited to make a presentation by the organizers of the workshop. Entitled “Aquaculture Certification: The Views of NGOs”, this is available on the workshop website (in Portuguese, titled *Certificação da aqüicultura: perspectivas das Organizações sociais*) at <http://www.enaca.org/modules/tinyd11/index.php?id=17>

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ing a genuine, inclusive, credible and transparent process of consultation”, given the nature of ‘Expert Workshops’, and the limitations of FAO. Would-be

Her presentation highlights five key aspects:

1. *The sustainability of aquaculture* depends on combined and coordinated initiatives that relate to planning, monitoring, and control of the activity, and must take into account the territorial implications of its development.
2. *The context and requirements of certification* raise issues that are significantly different for interests in producing and in consuming countries.
3. *Social and environmental aspects* are not given sufficient weight in the elaboration of certification norms for aquaculture.
4. *Certification systems* should take account of national laws in the processes of defining guidelines/standards in the countries concerned.
5. *The process of establishing certification systems* has not assured the rights of local populations affected by the aquaculture industry. The processes of consensus building in establishing norms for aquaculture certification have been characterized by the absence of participation of these populations and their representatives.

Given the limited number of participants representing social organizations at the workshop, NGOs prioritized the group discussions that focused on the workshop themes of social aspects, environmental aspects and food security. With a focus on social and environmental aspects, NGOs urged that the guidelines/standards should include:

- Respect for human rights and the right to life, and a repudiation of violence against communities.
- recognition of local communities' rights to proper participation.
- References to the health of communities affected by the development of aquaculture.
- References to the impacts on fisheries production and to food security of populations implicated by the development of the aquaculture industry.

- Respect of workers' security as defined by international norms on work, and respect of national legislation.
- Consideration, and inclusion, of gender and age-class aspects, and their implications, in the development of the activity.

Explicit recommendations were made for the protection of traditional and ancestral populations (indigenous communities, communities of African descent, artisanal fishers, and so on).

NGOs recommended that the cumulative and regional aspects of established farms should be

evaluated, and that farms should not be certified as isolated productive units. Rather, certification should also take account of the wider, related issues such as aquaculture feeds, which need to comply with sustainability criteria; high-value conservation habitats should be protected, as should marine flood plains and tidal mudflats; the fragmentation of ecosystems should be prevented; and migratory birds protected. Problems related to discharge of effluents should also be looked at, as also other issues such as the depletion/impoverishment of biodiversity and the degradation of ecosystems that are fundamental to traditional activities of communities.

In assessing the workshop, participating NGOs noted that the process of defining aquaculture certification



No to shrimp farms: Several groups believe certification of industrial shrimp aquaculture is 'greenwash'

standards does not end here. Neither is there any guarantee that their considerations and concerns will be incorpo-

tries needs to be fully explained and articulated, and consumer awareness about the context in which these food items are produced must be increased, they emphasized.

In the month following the workshop, the strong opposition and scepticism about aquaculture certification schemes was given vent in the Lampung Declaration, following the North-South Consultation held in Lampung, Indonesia, during 4-6 September 2007. The meeting, attended by representatives of local communities, NGOs, social movements and researchers from 17 countries in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and North America, criticized the attempts of “the industry, with the support of certain international NGOs, to improve its public image by developing certification processes and misleading labels such as ‘ethical shrimp’ and ‘organic shrimp’ to mask ecological damage, human-rights violations, widening income gaps, loss of jobs and other real problems caused by the industry. Such schemes ignore the rights to food security and sovereignty of the communities where shrimp is produced and do not provide space for local communities.” They urged “consumers, retailers, NGOs and governments to reject all the certification schemes developed thus far and those currently in development.”

The next step in developing the FAO/NACA Guidelines on Certification of Aquaculture will, therefore, be a crucial one. On it depends the confidence of the opposition and their willingness to participate further in the process. ♣

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rated in future plans. They therefore, await, with considerable anticipation, the publication of an updated version of the Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification from FAO/NACA. This will show whether or not the issues they raised in Fortaleza have been taken into account.

However, they do feel that their participation in the event was positive. Although they still have some reservations and some opposition to aquaculture certification, they felt that the organizers of the event valued their inputs. The Brazilian government too sought out the Brazilian organizations with the aim of initiating a debate on shrimp certification in Brazil.

On the final day of the workshop, the NGOs assessed that their participation had gone well. Of particular note was the understanding gained on the impacts of the salmon industry in Chile. Juan Carlos Cardenas of Ecoceanos explained that industrial aquaculture is environmentally unsustainable, socially unjust, and deals with products that are not safe for consumers.

The NGOs considered it important for international and national networks and organizations to discuss a follow-up strategy to cope with the next initiatives to be launched by FAO/NACA and national governments. In this regard, it is necessary to fine-tune and co-ordinate intervention strategies amongst NGOs and others working on the impacts of industrial aquaculture (mainly shrimp farming and salmon farming) in Latin America.

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For more

<http://www.redmanglar.org/redmanglar.php>

Redmanglar International

http://www.eng.walhi.or.id/kampanye/pela/tambak/070906_shrimp_mr/

Lampung Declaration

<http://www.terramar.org.br/>

Instituto Terramar (in Portuguese)

www.ecoceanos.cl

Ecoceanos (in Spanish)

<http://www.puresalmon.org/index.html>

The Pure Salmon Campaign

<http://www.enaca.org/modules/tinyd10/index.php?id=1>

FAO-NACA Aquaculture Certification Website (in English)

<http://www.gaalliance.org/>

Global Aquaculture Alliance