



Discussion Topic

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SEAFOOD IN A MEAT-AND-POTATOES WORLD

*"... Any fish bites if you got good bait
Here's a little tip that I would like to relate ...
I'm a goin' fishin', yes I'm goin' fishin'
And my baby goin' fishin', too."*

- Taj Mahal, Fishin' blues

That catchy blues song by blues artist Taj Mahal is appropriate for this discussion topic because of its obscurity. Fishing for food in Michigan is equally obscure.

You might not think so on a morning when your inland lake seems way too crowded with motorboats, but that's just more evidence that Michigan's waters have been overexploited for pleasure and underutilized for food.

Maybe it's only natural in Michigan, which was originally populated by western European farmers who fought to keep water away from their crops more than they tried to make a living from it.

And so water became a recreational industry, a venue on which to float and maybe catch one meal and several stories. It's the ultimate in sustainable, subsistence living. But let's face it. Subsistence in this society has gone the way of the wooden oar. Abundance is the preferred pursuit, and with this state's abundance of water, people are finally starting to wonder why we can't row ourselves into a thriving food fish industry.

One group has finally begun to pull.

In late December, Michigan Farm Bureau's Aquaculture Advisory Committee, in coordination with state agencies and the fish farming industry, hired a firm to produce a document that will help potential fish farmers get started, although the greatest impediment remains funding.

"The barrier has always been money," said Ernie Birchmeier, livestock specialist with Michigan Farm Bureau. "There's no pot of money set aside for fish farm development, and fish farmers have never had their hands out. But at the same time, we all have to look at fish farming in Michigan as a viable industry, whether it's inside or outside. And people who are already in the business can't be afraid of stepping on some new turf."

Stepping out, according to Dan Vogler, Michigan's largest food fish producer and president of the Michigan Aquaculture Association, really means catching up to the rest of the world.

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QUESTIONS

1. What can your county Farm Bureau do to encourage more aquaculture? List three things.
2. Which would be a more viable plan to increase Michigan's food fish production? Private facilities or net fish farming in the Great Lakes? What would the environmentalists say? What would the DNR say? What would lawyers say?
3. If trout became a locally-grown commodity, would you eat more of it? Why or why not?



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"We'll never discount the legitimacy of small farms and direct marketing, because that's a reasonable way to run a business," he said. "In a way, aquaculture is in front of that trend. But now we're beginning to recognize that aquaculture's growth potential is in food."

In fact, growth potential is arguably greater than any other agriculture industry. In 2010, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service, imports made up 86 percent of the seafood eaten in the United States, and most of that was from China.

So if American fishermen and fish farmers produce a mere 14 percent of the nation's seafood, the door seems wide open for new fish farming enterprises. Among the fish farms here, most of them are catfish farms in the southern U.S. In Michigan's climate, trout is the most suitable crop. But financing remains a hurdle.

"At this point," Vogler said, "aquaculture is viewed as a strange commodity, so we find ourselves seeking financing in some strange places. That's one reason we hired a company to discover the regulatory hurdles out there and to guide future business development. We want to create an environment of legitimacy for growers, because our key problem is not processing capacity. We need production."

Birchmeier agreed.

"This is all about food production," he said. "And that may well require an influx of capital, but we have the resources here, and it's up to current producers to spread the word. We can't sit back any longer or we'll continue to waste those resources."

Vogler said the industry needs to grow, and it must grow based on the state's strengths, including the abundance of clean water and the rapidly growing demand for seafood both at home and abroad.

"We understand that some ideas take time," he said. "But if we can't get the oars in the water for aquaculture development in this climate, it's a lost cause."



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