

Fish Pond Farming in the Mekong Delta: Policies for Polishing¹

The Mekong Delta offers the Vietnamese people constant flow of waters for their fish, rice, fruit, coconut, and vegetable farms. Originating from Tibet, it traverses through six countries: China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.

The river, measuring about 25,000 square miles, crosses the border of Cambodia and divides into many outlets, popularly described by locals as Cuu Long or the Nine Dragons².

These nine dragons seem to spew waters forming a huge fertile river,

from where the Vietnamese folks derive their family food and fund.

The ponds along the Mekong River in the Vietnam portion provide Vietnamese with fish. At a closer look, this resource (the fish), according to researchers from Can Tho and Wageningen Universities, can be neatly integrated with livestock and agro-forestry systems.

However, researchers see some risks even in a well-integrated system. A major risk is the resulting pollutants from the practice of aquaculture, livestock, and agri-/agro-forestry

culture that affect the environment. Also, food safety from the pond to the plate, was one of the hot topics discussed in a three-day symposium sponsored by Can Tho and Wageningen Universities.

According to Prof. Dr. Anders Dalsgaard, fish coming from waters contaminated with livestock and human fecal matter may be infected with parasites that can become a threat to human health. Research data to back up this issue may be used by the academe to influence policymakers to draft policies that will protect the interest of both



the consumer and the fish industry sectors. The fertilization of fish ponds with fecal matter is of great interest for environmental reasons: if not used in ponds it will be discharged directly to the river.

Finding the Right Policy Mix

Related to this, Prof. Dr. Vo Tong Xuan, one of the resource persons, cited that the Vietnamese government is currently looking at policy regulations aimed “at safeguarding a healthy environment with a high biodiversity.” Xuan says that in the interest of economic development, the local government must provide resources from which the growing population can make a livelihood. For the farm households the short-term provision of food and cash has the largest priority. Food safety, economy, and policy regulation – these have to be thought of thoroughly as part of the political dynamics, which are usually overlooked by researchers.

This leads to the next issues of extension and adoption. In the context of social issues, “What will encourage fisherfolk to adopt fish pond farming technology?” was one of the questions indirectly asked.

Biting the Bait

Prof. Dr. Shouqi mentioned that a well-balanced diet can reduce

environmental pollution. True, but is this diet within the buying capacity of the fisherfolk? On the other hand, how can fisherfolk be integrated to the global economy, when usually, they are small, their operations are marginal, and in terms of competitive advantage, they cannot even paw at par with the commercial giants who control the quality and quantity in the exporting arena.

There are answers brewing on the researchers’ plate. Among others, these include feeding the pond system more than feeding the fish and intensifying volume of fish stocks in a pond, but reducing commercial feed intake of fish by letting them nibble from the ecosystem’s natural food supply. This seems ideal to maintaining the ecosystem’s equilibrium, but not impossible.

The POND projects³ are currently doing this. The INREF and EU programs for Optimisation of nutrient Dynamics, or POND, intended to contribute to the development of more sustainable integrated agriculture-aquaculture farming systems (IIAS) with the aim of improving farm household livelihood. The research focused on fish selection, nutrient dynamics, and the role of fish ponds in existing farming systems through a concerted effort by various PhD students. Some technologies reaped from this

five-year project is now ready for dissemination. The next destination for this fish pond farming is Asia and Africa. The goal is huge - food security and poverty reduction. But one can always start small, and this means starting with fish and its home – the pond.

The pond may be murky and small, but don’t underestimate it: underneath, there are mysterious issues that await to be unraveled by scientists. (*Lorna C. Malicsi*).⁴

¹ *Highlights of the Fish Ponds in Farming Systems Symposium, April 25-28, 2006, Can Tho, Viet Nam. This symposium was sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Research and Education Fund (INREF) of Wageningen University, the Netherlands; important in-kind contributions came from Can-Tho University. For more information contact roel.bosma@wur.nl.*

² <http://www.travelmedia.com/mekong/delta.html>

³ *The POND Projects were a collaboration from the Universities of Wageningen (Netherlands), Stirling (Scotland), Can Tho, Mymensingh (Bangladesh), the Asian Institute of Technology, the Sissaket Agriculture College (Thailand), and the WorldFish Center. The POND activities were funded by INREF, WorldFish Center and the European Commission (ICA4-CT-2001-10026).*

⁴ *Represented SEARCA in the Fish Ponds in Farming Systems Symposium.*