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The seabass market

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By **M Surtida**

The seabass *Lates calcarifer* (bulgan, apahap in the Philippines) are high value fish occupying a market niche with the snappers (mangagat, maya-maya) and groupers (lapu-lapu). Recently, its skin has been found to be a suitable leather material with unexpected resiliency and durability, not to mention its attractiveness.

Seabass are cultivated in both fresh- and brackishwater ponds as well as in cages in coastal waters.

PHILIPPINES

At present, the culture of seabass is not popular in the Philippines. Although it can be grown side by side with grouper and snapper in floating cages, fish growers rarely grow seabass for market. Bernard Oabe, a fish grower from Basiao, Ivisan, Capiz says that he grows seabass for home consumption and for gifts to friends and business associates. He has a booming grouper trade, but with seabass he says "I brought a sample of seabass to Manila to test its market, but there were no takers." He further says "seabass of sizes 500-700 g are marketable; these sizes are grown in ponds for 8-12 months but are expensive to feed and fetch a meager P 110-120 per kilogram (chilled) in Panay restaurants. It is not profitable. Possibly, seabass demand in Manila is supplied by growers in Luzon or Mindanao."

Being a high value fish, seabass consumption is limited to specialized restaurants and occasionally, the domestic users. Florito Pudadera is a pond technician at an Oton, Iloilo fishpond that grows grouper, red snapper, seabass, shrimp, and milkfish. He sells live seabass at P 200 per kg (sizes of 1-2 kg), but orders are few and far between. Thus, his seabass production is limited to the restaurants the pond-owner owns. This set-up makes seabass culture profitable, but limited.

Seabass production in the Philippines must be negligible. The Bureau of Agricultural Statistics (BAS) does not include seabass in the top 35 fish species or products it listed from 1991 to 1997.

Infofish Malaysia (August 1997) also does not mention the Philippines as a producer of sea bass. Mentioned producers are Taiwan, Malaysia, and Thailand:

Seabass production in 1996	
Taiwan	10,000 tons
Thailand	2,800 tons
Malaysia	2,600 tons

The Food and Agriculture Organization in 1996 showed a decreasing seabass production after 1991. After peaking at 4,698 tons in 1991 (from 779 tons in 1990), seabass production further decreased to 36 in 1992, 14 in 1993, and 3 tons in 1994. It further decreased to 2.92 and 3 tons in 1995 and 1996 (BAS 1997).

Perhaps this is what the paper of Uwate and Tumaliwan (1985) meant when they said that the "short term (1-2 years) prospects for the development of a seabass culture in the Philippines are bright with increased consumer awareness, high market prices, availability of seedstock and established pond and cage culture technology. But medium term prospects (5-10 years) may see market saturation with numerous producer entrants and market adjustment with lower market prices."

Uwate and Tumaliwan further said that one aspect of market demand is consumer characteristics. With a population growth rate of 2.3% per year, the potential market for seabass is growing. But seabass is a high value fish more expensive than milkfish or tilapia. Thus, a high value fish, although preferred, is not purchased during difficult economic times.

Other markets in Asia

MALAYSIA

Market for fresh or chilled seabass is small. The September 1997 wholesale price of chilled seabass is RM 11-14 per kg (US$4-5 per kg). Seabass are normally sold in wet markets and in supermarkets. Home consumption is very limited. Although Malaysia imports some fish, there are hardly any for seabass as domestic production is enough to cover the local demand.

Malaysia even exports live seabass to Singapore (by truck) where the market offers higher prices.

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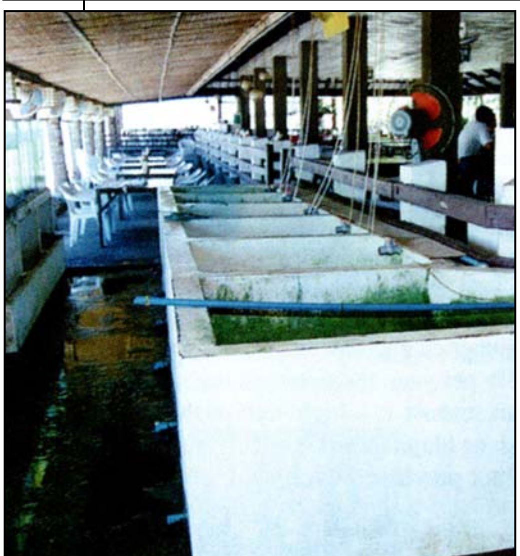
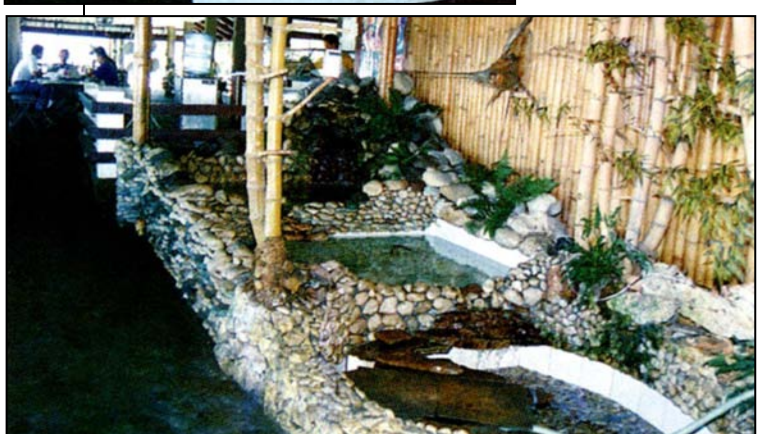
Seabass are mainly marketed in restaurants (top photo) in Iloilo City. One restaurant has holding tanks for live fish and crustacean display.





HONG KONG

The local seabass production of Hong Kong is negligible but local demand for it (restaurants) is high. Thus, live seabass together with other fish are imported from Taiwan, Indonesia, or Malaysia.

Current live, wholesale price in Hong Kong is HK$ 42.90-57.80 per kg. Thus, the live fish trade goes almost entirely through wholesalers to restaurants. Seabass is not a popular household product.

The weather also plays an important role in the seabass market. When few people dine out during inclement weather, it dulls the restaurant trade.

SINGAPORE

Singapore imports seabass from Malaysia and Indonesia. *Infofish* reports that almost 95% of the total seabass supply in Singapore goes to restaurants. The live, ex-farm prices range SS7.50-12.00 per kg.

THAILAND

Thailand is one of the major producers and consumers of cultured seabass in Asia. Production caters to the domestic market. But when supply exceeds local demand, seabass are exported to Malaysia.

In Asia, seasonal demand dictates the high value fish market including seabass. Festive seasons mean high sales. During the Chinese New Year, the largely ethnic Chinese population of Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia spend lavishly on ceremonial food regardless of price. Any live fish is popular to Chinese families because of the belief that it brings prosperity.

Australia

In 1995, Australia produced 311 tons of seabass worth AUS $3.4 million. Australia's main producer is Queensland. Whole plate-sized fish are preferred (250-400 g) but fillets are getting popular. Seabass are grown in freshwater ponds or sea cages.

The European markets

The seabass *Dicentrarchus labrax* are usually traded whole, mainly fresh and sometimes frozen in the European Union. The top producers in 1995 are Greece (4,000 tons),

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Spain (3,200 tons), Italy (1,800 tons), Tunisia (750 tons), and France (340 tons). Other producers are Egypt, Turkey, Cyprus, Portugal, and Malta. Italy used to be a leading producer of seabass but has now been overtaken by Greece even as it maintains its position as the leading EU market for seabass. *Infofish* projected that seabass production would increase in the coming years with the improvement of the Italian economy. But it is unlikely that the prices would increase greatly.

Miscellany

The best fish leather is the seabass skin. More durable than normal leather, it is making a definite impact. *Infofish* reported in 1992 that the finished product is found to be pleasing to the eye and versatile in its use.

Although seabass is found almost everywhere in Asia, it is only in Australia that it grows beyond 800 g per piece, appropriate for leather processing. The main feature of this leather is the scale pattern which forms pockets once the scales are removed chemically. Reportedly, chemical removal of scales is the best method as it leaves the delicate skin with the scale pocket intact.

Fish skin leather can be made into shoes, fashion designer dresses, belts, and attractive accessories. But most people still don't know how attractive seabass skin is or how attractive it is when tanned, although reports say that once one sees it, its potential cannot be denied.

Infofish further says that processors of fish leather strictly guard their formulas and methods of processing. A reasonably sized tannery needs an initial capital of AUS$ 5 million and enough raw materials. Thus, fish skin tanneries diversify and process other fish skins from eel, shark, stingray, crocodile, etc.

Reports say that fish skin leather has a bright future because it does not harm the environment. Fish skin is normally discarded by the fishing industry.

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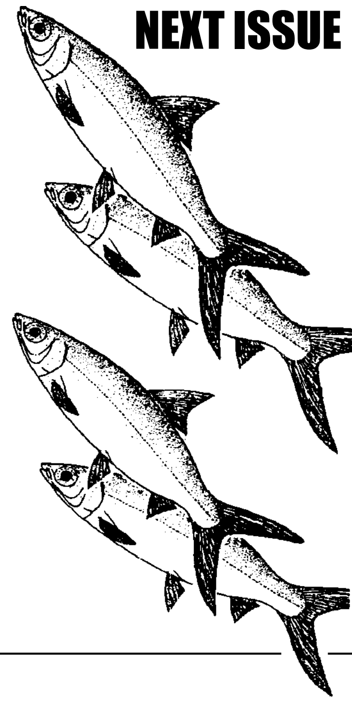

NEXT ISSUE we will be featuring a series on the milkfish industry in the Philippines, starting with (1) **Ecological limits of high-density milkfish farming,** then (2) **Economic value of the milkfish industry,** (3) **Milkfish fry supply from the wild,** and (4) **Milkfish ponds from mangroves.**

WATCH FOR IT!

Photographic competition on women in Asian fisheries

The Asian Fisheries Society with PADEK (Partnership for Development in Kampuchea) welcome entries for their photographic competition on "Women in Asian Fisheries" which will coincide with the 5th Asian Fisheries Forum in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 11-14 November 1998. The objective of the competition is to highlight the crucial role of women in the socioeconomic fabric of Asian fisheries.

Entries should be of 8R size (8 x 10 inches) with a 1-inch border all around. The accompanying caption must not be more than 15 words. Entries should reach the organizers by 30 September 1998. Entries will be judged based on relevance to the central theme, photographic quality, and aesthetic content.

Entries and further inquiries should be addressed to: The Secretariat, Asian Fisheries Society, MC PO Box 2631, Makati City 0718, Philippines