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Fish marketing practices

By **NJ Dagoon**

Trading activities at the Iloilo Fishing Port begins at about midnight and lasts to 7 in the morning. Fish from commercial fishing vessels and from fish ponds from other parts of Panay island are unloaded into the 1,200 m² market area as the mass of fish brokers and wholesale fish buyers eagerly await the business of the day.

Harbor and Market Operations Chief Rizaldy Toledo, notes that about 60 tons of fish are unloaded every day based on the past year's records. On a typical shift, Port market checkers on duty roam the crowded market premises to list the number of *bañeras* (each roughly equivalent to about 35 kg of fish) that constitute the volume of fish unloaded for the day. Milkfish and other aquaculture products accounts for more than 23% (or 1/5) of the market's total volume. Last year's top five local fishes in terms of volume (expressed in kg) were *bangus* (5, 571,125), *tuloy* (1,937,110), *aloy* (1,839,425), *baticuling* (1,272,075), and *bilang-bilang* (1,068, 865). Peak season for commercial marine fishing, according to the Port market chief, is around December to June. During the southwest monsoon, aquaculture products usually take the bulk of the products, with other fish coming even as far away as General Santos, Davao and Zamboanga in Mindanao.

Mr. Toledo mentions that commercial catch is now declining. "Then fishers only had to go some hours from here to their fishing grounds now they have to go as far as Cebu or Mindanao and spend more for their fuel."

Considering that milkfish is now among the top five fishes the Iloilo market accommodates, how will aquaculture products fare in the next 5-10 years? What will their effect on the market be? "Our population is increasing," he notes, "but fishponds can



Mr. Laure's trayloads of bangus bound for the Navotas fish market

no longer be expanded to preserve our remaining mangrove areas. The price of *bangus* is stable now, being maintained at P50 a kilo. We even get big sizes of Lake Sebu tilapia from General Santos City. Who would have heard of that ten years ago? Freshwater species are becoming more acceptable. If majority of fishes to be traded here will be aquaculture products in the future, I don't think there would be much of an effect. People are now becoming more health conscious, people will learn to accept the change. Even now, *hito* (catfish), already has a market. We have to be competitive because Taiwan is now gaining entry into the local market."

On one particular early morning visit to the port complex, the newsletter staff spotted Manuel Laure, Jr., busy packing a little more than two tons of four-month-old milkfish which were harvested prematurely from a flooded extensive fishpond in Ajuy, Iloilo. Laure has been a wholesale *comprador* for a Navotas-based fish trader for two years now. On the day of our interview, he has successfully negotiated a deal to buy the milkfish at P42 a kilo (11 small pieces) *sa komisyonan* (through a stand-in guarantor) PSJ Fish Brokers, one of around 25 trading facilities in the area. He believed that his boss in Navotas, a close business associate of the brokerage facility, might sell the fish on retail for about P58 a kilo.

Laure's aide and secretary, Sonia Ocampo, said that shipping the fish to Luzon necessitates the use of two large boxes with a capacity of about 1,400 kilos each. Trays, each containing around 35 kilos of fish and crushed ice packed in layers, are mounted inside. Ice is purchased at about P112 per block; each box uses about 14 ice blocks. A box containing about 42 trays

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Elmer Figuracion, the Fishing Port's Ice Plant and Refrigeration Division Chief (left) and Rizaldy Toledo, the Port's Harbor and Market Division Chief



Lloyd Hilado, Port market supervisor



Inside the processing facilities



A factory worker displays the branded and packed aso-os fillets

costs about P1,800 in shipping fees.

Edwin Jordan, on the other hand, is part of the husband-and-wife team who manages PSJ Fish Brokers. Today, he was able to purchase and sell about seven tons of varied fish, mostly coming from marine deepwater sources and caught by hand. He mentioned some fishes by their local names: *malasugi*, *gingaw*, *kansilayan*, and *kilawan*. The prices each kilo of fish took ranged from P10-20 (*pagi*, *bagis*) to about P100 (*lapulapu*, etc.). He expected a drop in sales these summer months because school was off.

The Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) that operates Iloilo Fishing Port Complex is a government corporation. Commercial, municipal and aquaculture fish producers and wholesale fish buyers pay fees for port entry, and market access. Fish brokers pay for market space on a contractual, renewable basis, other market fees and sundries (unloading, etc.).

Port authorities' main concern is to see that trading activities focused on the fish brokerage business go on smoothly. The fish broker's office serves as the middleman between the fish

producer and the wholesale fish buyer. The fish broker buys the fish in cash from the supplier (a commercial, municipal or aquaculture producer) and sells the fish wholesale by *bañeras*. Negotiations between the brokers' salesman (or in local terms, the *mayor panting*) come in the form of the informal "bulungan" system and the auction/bidding system. When fish are scarce, Mr. Toledo pointed out, the "bulungan" or closed system prevails. The broker charges a 6% commission for every kilo of fish he sells. Mr. Lloyd Hilado, market supervisor said that about 98% of the wholesale fish trade is in the form of credit. Since this "gentleman's agreement" is not binding, it often is the source of consternation among traders and port authorities.

Some other facilities that are available for fish activities at the Port are freezing and cold storage, and fish processing areas, which are available for rent at certain charges. The port, said Mr. Toledo, is an interagency effort, a one-stop shop for fishery-related activities. It even includes a customs area, and functions as a call port for fishing vessels that load provisions such as ice,

water and fuel.

Before a product is placed inside cold storage facilities, it has to go through contact plate freezing. According to Engr. Elmer Figuracion, chief of the Ice Plant and Refrigeration Division, the procedure charges P2,800 per freezing cycle of about 3-4 hours. When the inner body temperature of the product drops to a range of about -18°C to -40°C or lower, this may now be transferred to the cold storage area which charges about P1,988 per m² per month. The facility consists of two rooms each capable of storing 250 metric tons at -35°C. Engr. Figuracion noted that with the decline of the prawn industry, the facility is not as fully occupied as it should be. While the first room is exclusively for marine products; the second is rented out to distributors of poultry and meat products.

The processing zones, on the other hand, are divided into two: open (uncovered) space which is rented out at P20 per m² per month and covered space, at P90 per m² per month. The engineer mentioned four processing plants operational at this time.

We had a chance to tour the facility of one such plant: AFI, which also has offices in Cebu and Tagig in Metro Manila. AFI is a fish processing and exporting company that specializes on Japan-bound *aso-os* fillets. It gets its fish mainly from Estancia and Banate fishers. After scaling and cleaning, the fish are packed and block frozen at 550 g each.

This is but a brief prologue to the long account that constitutes the story of the fish trade industry. But one really interested in aquaculture should not be content with just this mere introduction. Aside from knowing how to farm his products well, he should also know how to market them successfully. He should don a pair of rubber sneakers (or slippers) himself and get out one day, to savor the smells, the sights, the sounds of the very wet and squishy fish market. ###

ers, fishpond owners, fisherfolk cooperatives, small-scale operators, research institutions and the academe, and other potential stakeholders. DA may consult with specialized international organizations in the formulation of the code of practice.

At least in the Philippines, the future of aquaculture looks green. But to really make an impact in the greening of our planet, the governments of both developed and underdeveloped nations should strive to stamp out poverty globally.

As the late Indira Gandhi at the first Earth Summit in Stockholm said: "Poverty is the greatest polluter. Poor people in developing countries contribute to ecological destruction through everyday practices such as firewood burning. They are not being malevolent, they are simply living off the cheapest resources available.

"Galloping poverty is a global challenge, not just one for developing nations. Everything is interconnected these days - the rich, the poor, the environment and the economy."

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make a profit. In other words, before production, know your market wherein profit is certain and impressive.

7. Failure to provide for behavioral and environmental needs of the fish. Usually, livestock are kept safe, warm, and comfortable. But aquaculture farms seldom take care of aspects such as presence of too much noise, rough and unnecessary handling, and unsuitable water temperature. Seldom noticed, these

factors are usually causes of poor growth, low conversion ratio, low resistance to disease, and poor survival.

8. Lack of business experience. Again, experts agree that well meaning owners who are hardworking and well-trained as fisheries biologists are seldom competent to meet the normal problems of management of a business. ###