

Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center

Aquaculture Department

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The milkfish fry industry in the Philippines

Aquaculture Department, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center

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The milkfish fry industry in the Philippines

Milkfish is cultured in brackish water ponds and freshwater pens. Research at the Department of Agriculture, however, has indicated that culture in pens in open sea is possible.

There are an estimated 176,000 ha of ponds and 5,000 ha of pens in the country producing milkfish, requiring an estimated 804 million fry annually. Aside from grow-out farms, the gathering and rearing of milkfish fry is a multi-million peso industry that provides livelihood and income to thousands of small fisherfolk.

A study conducted by the International Center for Living Aquatic Resources Management (ICLARM) estimated that 1.15 billion fry can be collected from the wild. However, there is fry shortage in the country. This is due to inefficient fry collection and handling techniques, and overexploitation of traditional fishing grounds, including illegal catching of broodstock or *sabalo*.

The type of fishing gear used to catch fry varies, depending on topography of fry ground, wind direction, current, and tidal fluctuation. Collection is usually done at high tide during full moon and new moon or when wind direction is favorable.

The country's milkfish grounds are located in the waters off Cagayan, Lingayen Gulf, Manila Bay, Batangas, and Albay in Luzon; Iloilo, Antique, Negros and Cebu in the Visayas; and

Zamboanga, Cotabato, and Davao in Mindanao. In Luzon, fry are available from March to August, with the peak months in May to July. In the Visayas, fry are gathered from March to January, with the peak months in April to June. In Mindanao, fry are collected throughout the year -- the peak season is from March to May. But fry catch in many areas has declined. In Bicol (Albay) for instance, only 12 million fry were collected in 1980 compared to 25 million in 1978. In other areas like the Sulu Sea (Zamboanga), fry productivity has been maintained and this is attributed to the coral reefs that serve as fry refuge.

There is also much loss of fry due to inefficient handling and rearing techniques. From the time the fry are caught to the time they are harvested in ponds and pens, only 39% of the total fry collected are estimated to survive.

Studies to improve survival rates -- e.g., techniques for catching and handling fry and for rearing the fry to fingerlings -- should be pursued. It would also help the industry if technologies for spawning milkfish in captivity and production of fry in hatcheries are refined and extended. In addition, the anti-illegal fishing laws should be strictly enforced and natural spawning grounds protected from destructive fishing practices.

Sources: *Agribusiness Weekly*, 11-17 Sept. 1990; *Agribusiness Monitor*, Oct. 1990; *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2 July 1992.

Exporting milkfish fingerlings is illegal!

The Philippine Government considers illegal the export of bangus fingerlings (or *hatirin* in the local language). This refers to fish measuring 25-100 mm and which have been grown for some time in nursery ponds.

- Fisheries Administrative Order No. 173 - 1, Series of 1991.

"Did you see any milkfish broodstock?" "Nope."

Philippine Daily Inquirer, 11 Nov. 1988

