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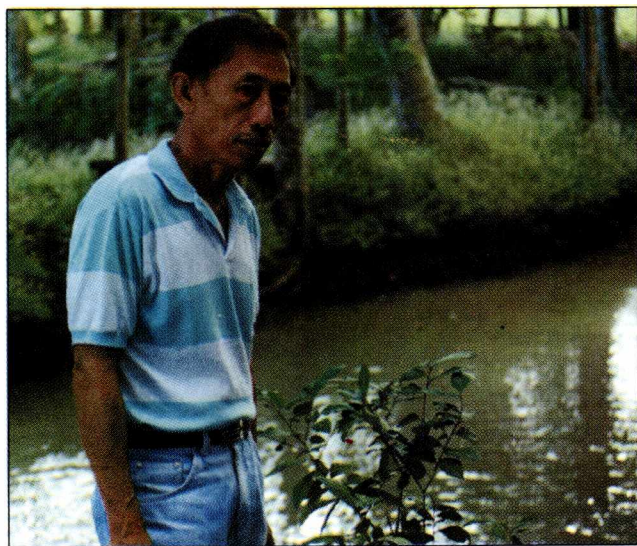
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Pototan: going for native catfish

By AP Surtida



Pablo Perez, 57, has been Chair of Pototan's municipal agriculture and fishery council (MAFC) for the last 15 years.

Pototan is 29 km north of Iloilo City and is better known as the "rice granary" of Panay island. For decades, it has bumper harvests of high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice. So, where does aquaculture fit in?

"We figured that when the so-called safety nets of the GATT-WTO are lifted in 2004, rice production wouldn't be as profitable as before. In anticipation of that, we're coming out with alternative livelihood projects for our constituents. Freshwater aquaculture is one viable alternative due to the presence of several African catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*) farmers. But we want to specialize in the native variety (*C. macrocephalus*) or 'pantat'," says Mr. Perez.

It is understandable why Pototan would like to be known as the native catfish center. Zarraga, a neighboring municipality is already known as the "African catfish center." The native catfish is more

juicy, succulent and delicious, experts agree. According to Mr. Perez, they also want to raise tilapias, bighead carp and even go into seabass polyculture.

Asked about bodies of water to raise these fishes, Mr. Perez, cited several water impoundments and irrigation canals. "We don't have problems with water here as far as fish raising is concerned, except for pesticide pollution or run-offs, but we are tak-

ing care of that."

Queried on details of their plans to establish the native catfish industry in Pototan, Mr. Perez gave us an overview. The project title is "Native catfish industry development for the municipality of Pototan." This project is a collaborative effort between the LGU, the Iloilo Provincial Government, SEAFDEC/AQD and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources.

Mr. Perez' projection is that once it is put into place, the native catfish industry would generate at least P5 million annually, providing livelihood to small farmers who can grow them in their backyards and in some portions of their rice farms.

The project would cost about P225,000 which will be bankrolled by the countryside development fund of Congressman Manuel Parcon of the 4th Congressional District, Province of Iloilo.

Among the components of the project are: municipal hatchery, feed dealers and suppliers, farmer-cooperators' roadside

market, and barbecue stands, and the cooperative marketing network.

According to Mr. Perez, the native 'pantat' used to be abundant in the rivers, creeks and streams of Pototan before the use of HYV rice. With HYV rice came, the heavy inputs of pesticides and the eventual run off to rivers and streams poisoned the natural spawning grounds of the 'pantat.'

But the shift to integrated pest management in rice farming has encouraged fish culture in rice farms, and this augurs well for the return of the native catfish. AQD's role is to provide training on breeding and nursery management of the native catfish, and technical support on its grow-out.

Mr. Perez, together with five other technical personnel of the Iloilo Provincial LGU, underwent a two-week training at AQD in September this year. AQD also provided Mr. Perez with 289 sub-adult catfish which he is raising in his ponds at barangay Cato-ogan in Pototan.

Hopefully, in 6-7 months they will turn into breeders and catfish fingerlings dispersal in Pototan would begin.

Asked about policies, regulations, resolutions which he, as a MAFC chair, has enforced, authored or advocated for the benefit of the environment and sustainable food production, he mentioned (1) a resolution on banning electric fishing (use of car batteries); (2) banning of carabaos from irrigation canals so as not to pollute the waters with their waste; and (3) prohibition of red-labeled pesticides.

Queried about any problems he encounters in his food production programs, Mr. Perez noticed that people do not readily accept innovations or new ideas unless they see how it performs first. "It's good that people see the profitability of African catfish. It's not hard to convince them to switch to the local variety; after all, there are already existing ponds."

Mr. Perez is also thankful to AQD for its proactive stance particularly to LGUs in Panay which are the conduits to local communities in bringing AQD technologies and effecting sustainable aquaculture and coastal resources management. ###