

A blueprint for US aquaculture expansion?

New research indicates the US aquaculture industry needs to target strategic outreach and consumer education in order to achieve its growth potential.

Globally, the marine aquaculture industry generates roughly \$166 billion per year, with steady growth predicted for years to come. However, the US lags in international markets in terms of production levels, and for the industry to grow, there must be a general understanding and acceptance of farmed marine foods by the public.

With that in mind, researchers from the University of Maine, led by assistant professor of economics Caroline Noblet and assistant professor of risk communication Laura Rickard, designed and implemented a nationally distributed survey to better understand US resident perceptions and knowledge of sustainable aquaculture.

The questions are pertinent to ongoing research at UMaine through the Sustainable Ecological Aquaculture Network (SEANET) and to answer longstanding questions posed by industry insiders and stakeholders.

“One of the things that there is a lot of curiosity about relates to how much people actually know about aquaculture,” Noblet says. “It’s been 20 or 30 years since the industry was first introduced here and things have really evolved. We wanted to take a closer look at that.”

The team also sought to learn which sources of scientific information the survey respondents used in making aquaculture decisions and what other factors might influence their opinions or habits regarding the industry.

“The industry is similarly interested in learning more about where consumers are getting their information about aquaculture,” says Noblet. “Is their information from the news media? From scientists? From the industry itself?”

With a better understanding of consumer decision-making and awareness, stakeholders would be better able to recognize the challenges and opportunities that the industry faces in terms of growth potential and visibility.

Noblet’s team contracted the GfK Group, an international consulting firm, to administer the survey. Recipients were selected to be representative of the US census, ensuring the results were based on specific demographic parameters and not a randomized sampling of individuals throughout the states.

The survey generated more than 1,200 responses from across the country and yielded several interesting — and exciting — results.

In general, researchers found relatively low industry awareness among US consumers, which suggests public opinion may be altered with ongoing education and outreach efforts aimed at informing a collective understanding about aquaculture.

Data also revealed a need for targeted efforts to address knowledge gaps in various demographic groups, including people who are older, have less education, and live in landlocked states. Interest and engagement with aquaculture increases in communities with high rates of seafood consumption. For aquaculturists in Maine, where the sea-to-table relationship is more pronounced, this information could be used to design impactful marketing campaigns and educational programs to increase awareness and understanding in diverse communities.

Participants expressed a desire to learn more about aquaculture and seemed, for the most part, open to expansion within the industry, as long as it doesn't affect other coastal recreation activities. As a result, the research team was encouraged by the general open-mindedness suggested by the responses and believe the information can be used to steward resources toward ongoing research and community conversation.

“People are really on the fence because they don't have enough information to make a solid opinion about it,” says Michaela Murray, an undergraduate student in ecology and environmental sciences, who led efforts to test and synthesize the results.

“There is a true lack of knowledge about aquaculture,” adds Ross Anthony, a graduate student in resource economics and policy at UMaine, who analyzed survey data. “And there is a great opportunity to help form the public opinion about what it really is.”

This spring, the team will conduct a Maine-centric citizen survey to further clarify attitudes and assumptions within the state. This additional information will help create a refined sense of the opportunities and challenges in both coastal and inland communities, and allow stakeholders to develop localized strategies to address articulated concerns.

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