5-25-2006

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LADB Latin America Data Base News & Educational Services

NotiCen

LADB Article Id: 51721
ISSN: 1089-1560

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Category/Department: Costa Rica
Published: 2006-05-25

Costa Rica seems set to enter the business of tuna farming, a practice widely condemned among environmentalists. There is a plan afloat to build the world's first yellowfin tuna ranch at the mouth of the Golfo Dulce. The area is known for its diverse ecosystem and prized as a sportfishing mecca. Critics had hoped the Environment and Energy Ministry (MINAE) would stop the project, but it did not.

Now all that is lacking to get the farm underway is a permit from the Instituto Costarricense de Pesca y Acuicultura (INCOPESA). Peruvian biologist Eduardo Velarde told Intrafish, a seafood-industry news service, in August 2005 that he had hoped to have cages for the operation installed by year's end. That was not to be, but Velarde is still in position to boast this will be the first yellowfin tuna farm in the world. The project is a development of Granjas Atuneras de Golfito SA, with capital from Venezuela and Spain. The operation contemplates building ten circular cages, 50 meters wide and 20 meters deep, grouped 2.8 km from the coast near Punta Banco. The total concession is to be 5 km long and half as wide, allowing for a buffer between it and any future fish farms.

Velarde said there was space for seven more such farms in the area, or an eventual 70 more cages between Punta Banco and Punta Burica. The buffers, Velarde explained, are necessary to prevent contagion in the case of a disease outbreak. In its first phase, four cages are to be built with an investment of US$3 million. This will not be a fish farm as the term is usually understood, but rather more like an aquatic feedlot, where fish caught elsewhere are fattened for market and sold to order. Velarde intimated in 2005 that the technology for breeding the fish does not yet exist. "The Inter-American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) in Panama has a laboratory for the artificial reproduction of yellowfin tuna, which is unique in the world. They study the behavior of tuna in natural conditions, but in captivity. That means they do not control the physical and chemical parameters attempting to simulate nature," he said. "So, as it is at present not economically viable to farm tuna from eggs, we will start with large tuna, which will prepare people so that in the near future it is profitable to farm them from eggs."

In the meantime, the Costa Rica operation will involve tuna clippers catching the fish, then a tug from the fish farm will transfer them at sea to a transport cage and drag them to the fattening and storage cages. Later, the value-added fish will be sold to the US and Japanese markets.

Environmentalists object

Objections to the plan are many and varied. Locally, the Programa Restauracion de Tortugas Marinas (PRETOMA) raised questions just ahead of an INCOPESCA meeting scheduled for the near future where a vote on the project is to take place. The sea-turtle organization said there had been insufficient public discussion, and local fishers believe their own livelihoods would be jeopardized. PRETOMA has operated a conservation project in the area for a decade. The organization has

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called the environmental-impact study upon which MINAE based its approval "full of holes." "There is barely any mention of the many endangered species that live in or migrate to the Golfo Dulce...whales, dolphins, stingrays. We are talking of a wall of cages near the mouth of the Golfo Dulce. These species could get caught in the nets," said PRETOMA representative Noah Anderson.

PRETOMA is most concerned about the Olive Ridley turtles that nest on a beach near Punta Blanco. From 100 to 200 of the creatures nest from July to December, laying around 100 eggs each. "Turtles have nails on their fins that very easily get stuck in a net," said Anderson. Velarde countered that the turtles would see the wall of nets and swim around them. The waste generated by the closely packed tuna is also a concern, as it is in other fish farms in the region (see NotiCen, 2006-05-11). The Fundacion Vida Marina (FVM) has complained that the zone lacks a management plan that would allow for an assessment of whether the gulf can handle the volume of contaminants the farm would produce.

Reporters were unable to reach Velarde to deal with the question, but Alvaro Otarola, INCOPESCA aquaculture chief, said that there is "much disinformation" about the project among environmentalists and that the currents in the zone would disperse the waste. Not everyone at MINAE buys that assessment.

MINAE coordinator Miguel Madrigal noted, "According to the environmental-impact study, the currents move in such a way that the waste will be carried out to sea, away from the gulf. But we don't have any studies of the currents to confirm this." Madrigal coordinates the Coastal Marine Commission of the Osa Conservation Area.

The commission has registered great concern about the waste. The model for yellowfin wrangling appears to have come from similar ranches specializing in bluefin tuna. Greenpeace has objected strongly to the model as it has been applied in the Mediterranean Sea. Greenpeace has called the practice a recipe for disaster, pointing to worsening overfishing. "The practice has resulted in an increase in the catch of juvenile tuna, and exacerbated the management difficulties faced by ICCAT [conservation body for the Atlantic tuna stock]," said Greenpeace. "No one knows the actual amount of bluefin tuna caught in the Mediterranean Sea, but it is clearly higher than the total allowable catch."

In Costa Rica, FVM's Denise Echeverria voiced the same concern. "In modern aquaculture, the reproduction cycle has to be closed," she said. "The way this project is set up, it reduces the wild stock of tuna. They should be producing everything in a cycle from eggs. It is very easy to go hunting and stick the tuna in a cage." Tuna ranching produces collateral damage because of the huge quantity of fish needed to feed and fatten the captive animals. In Costa Rica, this will require 10 tons of sardines a day per cage.

Sportfishers have expressed concern that this will absorb the entire Costa Rican sardine population, upsetting the ecological balance because these feeder fish are at the base of the food chain. Velarde has said, however, that he plans to import the sardines from Peru, Chile, Venezuela, and Uruguay, without mention of what the effect on those local fisheries would be. "I will need thousands of tons of sardines; I can't get them here," he said.

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The need will be enormous. For each kilogram of tuna produced, 20 kg of feeder fish are required. In the end, the arguments pit opinions, however founded, against each other about a project that is nothing other than an experiment. Costa Rica has no experience with fish farms, let alone operations of this size in the waters of a wildlife site.

For FVM's Echeverria, it is an experiment that will continue until it fails. "They will in the future look to grow, they will look for greater profits and more efficiency, reducing costs...and who knows to what effects. This is just the beginning. If we give permission to this farm, more will be granted down the line." And Velarde agrees. "Aquaculture is in diapers. These people will become skilled in mariculture and can eventually start their own farms," he said.

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