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Aquaculture Exchange: Flavio Corsin, IDH

22 August 2016
By James Wright

Epidemiologist urges industry-wide cooperation to combat the industry's most pressing issue: disease

After 14 years in Vietnam, Flavio Corsin recently relocated to **IDH (The Sustainable Trade Initiative)** (http://www.idhsustainabletrade.com) headquarters in the Netherlands. Europe is the best fit for his young and growing family at this time, he told the *Advocate* in an interview last week. But it's pretty clear that the Southeast Asian nation will remain near and dear to his heart.

"I love Vietnam," said the native of Italy, who will be presenting "Developments in Aquaculture Improvement" at the Global Aquaculture Alliance's GOAL conference next month in Guangzhou, China. "I love the country, I love the industry, I love the work we did and continue to do."

Corsin, manager of IDH Vietnam, will be able to address aquaculture on a more global level from the Dutch organization's offices in Utrecht. He had a big impact in Vietnam, serving as senior aquaculture advisor for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) from 2007 to 2010 – to develop pangasius farm standards for the Aquaculture Dialogues, which eventually were passed to the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) – and consulting for the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization.

When did you first visit Vietnam? What was your area of focus then?

Flavio Corsin, manager of IDH Vietnam, speaking at the GOAL 2014 conference in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam.

It was for shrimp. I was finishing off my masters in aquaculture from [University of] Stirling. They had a position for a Ph.D. in Vietnam and India. This was 1996 and '97. It was for one year in Vietnam and one and a half in India. At that time, I was single and ready to conquer the world, so I said, "Yes, of course!" So I went to Vietnam. My Ph.D. thesis was on disease control in shrimp, the white spot disease.

Basically it was looking at taking an epidemiological approach to disease control in aquatic animals. It's basically the science that tells you if you do this, you're two or three times more likely to develop whatever disease. That can be achieved only when you use epidemiological tools. No doctor can tell you that, unless you do an epidemiological study. In human medicine, and increasingly in veterinary medicine, epidemiology has a long history. In aquaculture it is still early days.

Tell me about the stunning growth of Vietnam's pangasius industry you witnessed firsthand.

It's typical of the Vietnamese, actually. The Vietnamese are a very dynamic people. When we started working on pangasius with **NACA (http://www.enaca.org/)** (Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific), an intergovernmental organization that brings together basically all the governments between

Iran, North Korea and Australia on aquaculture, there was a lot of focus on better management practices.

At the time you had small ponds and cages; that was the typical way of doing it. There were a lot of backyard ponds, small ponds growing all sorts of things. Then there was a transition to cages, the floating cages on the Mekong River. Then there was a transition to fencing, and [diverting] the water from the river into ponds. Every couple of years there was something new.

We started developing the standards through the Aquaculture Dialogues in 2006-07. By that time, we were looking also at standards for cages and the fencing of the river. But after two years, there were basically no cages, only ponds. By then only the standards for ponds were actually useful.

This is typical of the Vietnamese way of doing things, and it's the same in other sectors. When I was there I was working on aquaculture and coffee and the big expansion of coffee production. The Vietnamese are so dynamic but they don't think enough about the strategizing and whether the quantity mentality is really what should be achieved. You had all these companies that were very successful at producing quantity, producing large amounts and competing with each other, which basically drove the prices down. Think about it: They had a monopoly on the pangasius market. A lot of things can be done with a monopoly. Because of the ability to produce huge volumes in a very limited amount of land, they basically produced and produced and produced and then found it very difficult to find higher prices. And the level is still there – the price is low and it's very difficult to drive them back up, especially when they're competing with other sources of whitefish fillets.

What about the competition among sustainability certification schemes in aquaculture? A good thing?

The competition between the standards is good. But more importantly, how can we collaborate on addressing the critical issues of the sector? If a producer cannot produce because it's affected by disease, then who cares if it's certified by ASC, GlobalGAP, BAP (Best Aquaculture Practices) or Friends of the Sea? There is no production, there is no fish for people to buy. It's a loss for everybody. When you have disease, you are losing the animals you've been feeding and caring for. You lose the fish, the feed, the water, the labor – it's a waste for everybody. I think that is where the energy of the industry should go, to address those things.

How do we put behind us all the competition and support for one program or another and all pull toward more efficient use of resources? Remove the bottleneck and from there it becomes easier for governments to support and for investors to put money into the sector, for traders to actually feel secure in sourcing from a certain country.

What are the IDH programs in aquaculture looking at?

It's a very interesting time. IDH, at the beginning, founded the ASC, with the WWF. Then we had a huge demand for ASC pangasius, so we developed a program that focused on helping farms move toward ASC certification. It did exactly what the Vietnamese wanted it to do – it exploded on the market. Within two years the industry was more than 20 percent ASC-certified.

We are looking at three species: pangasius, shrimp and tilapia. It was good for ASC and for pangasius, because we had market demand. But with shrimp, we realized we couldn't do the same thing as we did for pangasius because there was already a standard there and a market demand. And we work with the market. The way IDH works is we look at win-win arrangements; we look at the market and what can be conducted on the production side, but also look at the real sustainability issues. Not just a piece of paper, the certification, but the things that really make a difference for everybody – the things that you invest in, because if you don't there's no future for the sector. That's the mentality of IDH.

We looked at shrimp, and said we could not have a program with only ASC, because there were other standards out there, and market-driven mechanisms devoted to bring the sustainability changes we want to see on the ground. Disease control, better management practices, call it what you want. If there is market demand, and you have a measurable change on the ground, I don't care if it is ASC or something else. We want to see that shift and we are cooperating to see that shift.

We are now developing a plan for what we want to do with the aquaculture sector by 2020. Certification is good. But what are the biggest issues the sector is facing? Health and feed are the critical pillars where, if we contribute to make a difference, that's really what we can be proud of. That's exactly where we are now. Whether you go for certification, or iBAP, or not, you can have measurable change on the

way business is conducted. This is information that can be analyzed to provide better feed to the farm, better ingredients into the feed and its efficiency, which leads to better health. It's very exciting now, because there's a lot of energy toward collaboration.

Why does IDH support the iBAP improver program, which moves facilities either to certification or at least better practices?

You're correct: The end point is important. It's often a stepwise process. You can target certification, which is OK. But the real improvement you are conducting on the ground is what matters. Whether it's certification or not doesn't really matter to us – it's important for proof of compliance, and it's important for the trade, giving the buyer assurance that it was produced according to certain practices. But from our side we support programs that bring real change.

Putting an end point to certification or not, it's semantics. Imagine it's a farm that just got certified but didn't do any [improvements]. The good thing about improver programs is you're identifying where you are, where you have to be, the changes you have to make and then we are all removing the bottlenecks toward achieving those changes and that's what we want to see.

If aquaculture needs two things in order to grow to its full potential, I'd say it's greater investor interest and more government support. Do you agree, and if so, what are the roadblocks for each?

It depends on what level you're looking at. Think about the investor and the government as part of an environment that can support the sector. The real things preventing any type of engagement are health and disease, as it involves everybody. The risk associated with aquaculture is generally too high for investors. Look at the limits on production you have, look at the unknowns you have. There are very few safety nets. What is the plan for a country like Vietnam or Thailand or Ecuador to control diseases?

There is little organization within the sector to be able to identify early when there is a problem, to react early when there is a problem and to identify why you have that problem. What are the risk factors? Why was this farmer affected and another one? Was there a problem with the seed source? These types of things, this level of information, is not there at all at a sectoral level.

That's where we have to put our effort. How do we put behind us all the competition and support for one program or another and all pull toward more efficient use of resources? Remove the bottleneck and from there it becomes easier for governments to support and for investors to put money into the sector, for traders to actually feel secure in sourcing from a certain country.

A supplier was saying, I think it was in Boston, that they had to change suppliers because of EMS (Early Mortality Syndrome). Apart from the cost you have with losses, there is a cost in restructuring your supply chain. When you have a sector that can manage its own reliable health forecasts, then investors actually will come like they come in other agri-sectors. We're working in other sectors where investors have no problem inputting money. But there those sectors have some sort of certainty around it. Aquaculture has a lot of vulnerability, a lot of volatility.

A frequently asked question is, what percentage of the global farmed seafood supply is certified? Some estimates range between 5 to 7 percent globally. How high can that figure go in the future?

Take coffee, as an example, because we are developing a Global Coffee Platform, a global initiative with all the big players. If you look at the trends there, people are moving away from certification and they are saying there are some things we cannot afford to have on our products – nobody can. Deforestation, child labor, harmful chemicals – those sort of things. At the same time everybody makes their own commitments to their own markets or where they want to go toward sustainability. There you

are developing metrics where you measure how you are addressing sustainability issues. Everybody should comply with a baseline code, 100 percent of the industry. Go in that direction. Everybody should agree that is the baseline and then everybody is pulling in the same direction.

I think as things are now, some markets are not asking for certification and are not likely to ask for it at all. They will ask for food safety, which is at the top of the agenda for a lot of countries where fish is eaten, which is Asia. That is going to be the top priority. Certification might grow a couple of digits. It is fine. But food safety is the key, which is related to health. No farmer wants to use products they don't have to. They use them to prevent something from happening and when they have no alternative. It costs money to control diseases and it may affect food safety.

Putting a forecast on certification, for me, is something that will have to happen at a later stage. We have to fix the biggest problems first, and we have to start thinking about where we want to go as a sector.

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The GAA (Global Aquaculture Alliance) is a great organization; it brings together key industry players. But its association with the BAP program somehow is preventing the organization to truly succeed as a convener of the sector around what needs to happen. I think there is a lot of energy toward achieving this. We all know the critical priorities, but it's really trying to get the industry organized in a way in which we don't think BAP or ASC, but we think health and diseases. How do we do it? How can certification contribute to that? How can government contribute to that? When we control diseases we can start to think about other issues. But health is central to everything.

What regions in the world have the greatest need for fish farming: the economic opportunities and improved practices, as well as the resources, in terms of climate, water and labor, etc.? What country could be the next "new" aquaculture player? Cambodia? Colombia? Panama? Cuba?

Africa! There are a lot of reasons why it's not developed but the resources are enormous, the potential is enormous. That is where the market is. A lot of the fish produced in Africa is consumed domestically or regionally. There are a lot of ways in the fish trade in which aquaculture can provide freshness. Mostly inland aquaculture, particularly in West Africa with catfish and tilapia. Egypt as well, with the production of tilapia. Sub-Saharan Africa is going to be big. All the elements are there. It's about having good quality feed and good quality seed. You could see an explosion of production there.

Will a benchmarking initiative, such as GSSI, help to make clearer sense for the marketplace?

I like GSSI, because it can reduce costs to industry and it helps us to pull in the same direction. But I would like to see a global platform that brings together the key players to understand what needs to happen in the aquaculture sector. This would set what the research priorities are, funding needs and so on. That platform would be a public-private group that is recognized and has the credibility as an agenda setter. Is that GSSI? I don't know but I think that is what is required. We need to get away from our egos and actually develop something that works for the sector.

What can GOAL attendees expect from your presentation on improvement in aquaculture?

I'll be calling for action from the industry, from organizations and from nonprofits for collaboration. There is still a lot of competitiveness. Even at the nonprofit level. "I have my tool, you have your tool, I work with these guys, and that's the ranking I use – whatever it is!" How do we get away from all our instruments, and this way of thinking and all pull in the same direction?

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