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Study ties animal welfare practices to consumer purchasing

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By Lauren Kramer

Changing Tastes, Datassential will discuss findings at GOAL conference



A study found that consumers would be more inclined to purchase fish and seafood if they knew it was humanely harvested. Image courtesy of Changing Tastes.

There's an opportunity to expand the U.S. market for farmed fish and seafood if the aquaculture industry were to more widely adopt humane production practices. That's the word from a new study by Changing Tastes and Datassential that will be presented at the Global Aquaculture Alliance's (GAA) **GOAL 2018** (https://www.aquaculturealliance.org/goal/?_hstc=236403678.caf887062fff61768951d751a5456bd1.1680827766051.1680827766051.1680827766051.1&_hssc=236403678.1.1680827766052&_hsfr conference in Guayaquil, Ecuador, this week.

The study found that both consumers and those who make decisions on menu planning and purchasing would be more inclined to purchase fish and seafood if they knew it was humanely harvested. Respondents communicated that humanely harvested product is higher quality, better tasting and has a better texture.

Increasing numbers of American consumers are voicing their intention to reduce their consumption of red meat, and their top choice for its replacement is fish and seafood, said Arlin Wasserman, spokesperson for the consultancy firm Changing Tastes.

The adoption of humane practices in aquaculture and the avoidance of antibiotics are two strategies that address consumers' concerns about eating more fish and seafood, and could make farmed product even more attractive than wild, Wasserman said. "While adopting humane practices and eliminating antibiotic use can improve the U.S. market for fish and seafood, not making improvements may pose a risk to the industry's reputation and the appeal of farmed fish and seafood."

Consumers' concerns about red meat and poultry consumption are primarily driven by animal welfare and the use of antibiotics, said Marie Molde of Datassential. "Consumers now have the same concerns about eating fish and seafood," she said.

In exploring the concept of humane harvest, Wasserman and Molde examined four aspects of production: whether efforts were made to reduce pain felt by fish in transport; in stunning before slaughter; in practices to modify the fish either during breeding or production by mouth clipping or eye stalk ablation; and the use of antibiotics.

"We're not sure how widely used these practices are," Wasserman said.

The study found that most consumers and restaurant operators believe that the major certification and ratings programs already include humane-practice criteria. That's not the case, Wasserman said.

"While some of the standards may address practices, none of the programs currently has a set of standards intended to reduce pain felt by fish, which is the basic standard of humane animal production," he added.

The aquaculture industry can avoid many of the challenges that suppliers of other proteins have experienced by investing in better practices now in order to increase sales rather than respond to criticism and declines.

The gap between consumer perception and reality is working to the advantage of aquaculture farmers right now, Wasserman said.

"We see it as a beneficial halo that consumers believe humane practices are addressed, but there's a risk. If a consumer or motivated buyer goes to see how humane production standards are covered by rating programs, they won't see a clear direction on the reduction of suffering, only steps related to quality and the environment. We know the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and Seafood Watch are all thinking about how or if to address these issues, but there's a gap in what consumers and menu decision makers believe and what the reality is. If their belief proves to be untrue, there's a loss of trust."

Last year GAA accepted a \$435,000 grant from the Open Philanthropy Project to develop best practices for animal welfare for salmonids, tilapia and channel catfish. As the first year of the three-year project wraps up, the team headed by GAA VP Steve Hart has a summary on current practices.

"We've found there's a lot of variation across different species," Hart said. "Because the salmon industry as a whole is a more advanced commercial industry comprised of large, vertically integrated companies, its practices are far more advanced than the other industries. It's easier for these companies to implement standard practices than it is for other aquaculture farmers operating family farms. Also, fish welfare practices for salmon farmers have become a production focus driven by trends in Europe. Humane harvesting practices like percussive stunning or electrical stunning – considered the two most humane kinds of stunning – are used by most players in the industry."

The study suggests that for producers focused on humane production, there's a great opportunity to market those attributes as a way to positively differentiate their farmed fish or shellfish from other aquaculture products. In so doing they can address consumers' main concerns of switching from meat to fish or shellfish.

"Showing that humane production practices are in place may overcome a barrier about share of the plate," Wasserman said. "The aquaculture industry can avoid many of the challenges that suppliers of other proteins have experienced by investing in better practices now in order to increase sales rather than respond to criticism and declines."

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