

Push to expand barramundi farming

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Samantha Donovan: In Australia, barramundi is widely regarded as a local fish, but nearly 60% of the barra we eat is imported. That statistic has Australian barramundi fishermen worrying the industry has no future, despite the latest season being one of their best in 40 years. So should the local industry be focusing on farming barramundi? Abbey Halter prepared this report.

Abbey Halter: In the crystal blue waters of the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia, barramundi fishermen are having their best season in decades. But there's a good chance the barramundi you buy at your local fish and chip shop won't be coming from these waters. That's because about 60% of all barramundi eaten in this country is shipped here from South East Asia. John Kemeridis has commercially fished in the Gulf of Carpentaria for nearly 50 years.

John Kemeridis: Oh it's impacting us a lot. We've got the best industry in the world, why would you want to kill it? We've got the best quality product, we've got everything going for us. What am I going to do at my age? All I've done is fish.

Abbey Halter: Thanks to competition from overseas and regulations like gillnet bans, the wild caught industry in Australia is shrinking. And it's not just happening here. Lukas Manomaitis is the Global Aquaculture Coordinator for the US Soybean Export Council.

Lukas Manomaitis: Many developed nations such as Australia, the United States and other developed nations kind of outsourced their seafood supply. I think if consumers really understood the benefits of moving towards farm production, they might be more willing to consider it.

Abbey Halter: Farmed production could be the key to putting Australian fish on Australian plates. Lucas Manomaitis says while Australia will struggle to compete on price, it has other advantages.

Lukas Manomaitis: The benefit for Australia is that you have very experienced people and high quality standards with regards to hatcheries and production. We've worked in the past with Port Stephens, we've gone to Bribie Island and the quality of the research there is quite high, the rest of the Sunshine Coast and so on. So that's something that I think you would have a definite advantage of.

Abbey Halter: Someone who's experienced both sides of the industry, wild caught and farmed barramundi, is Dave Hamman. After catching barramundi for over 25 years, he now works at the Les Wilson Barramundi Discovery Centre in Cooromba as their hatchery technician. While he prefers the taste of wild caught barra, he has a unique perspective on the rise of aquaculture farming.

Dave Hamman: The difference in the industries is the farmed barramundi is more accessible all year round and commercially it's seasonal. We don't sell barramundi to restaurants and things like that like commercial fishermen do. So we breed the fish to release into rivers for restocking. I think it's going to be fundamental for the development of the barramundi.

Abbey Halter: The centre's manager is Chris O'Keefe, a long time barramundi farmer. He wants to see the industry grow, but says it will need government help to even the playing field.

Chris O' Keefe: In Australia we have a lot of rules that govern how we drill those fish and what we can use and what chemicals or antibiotics. We can't use any of those sort of things and we want to grow a sustainable but also just a very healthy product. It needs to be a level playing field that anybody who wants to bring fish in from outside the country needs to have the same set of rules. Otherwise we're really handicapping our own farmers.

Abbey Halter: He believes the wild caught and farmed barramundi industries should join forces.

Chris O' Keefe: I think they have to work hand in hand. You can't just have all farmed barramundi, you need to have the wild ones as well. That's our breeding stock, that's also what people want to catch. You don't want to go to a pond and catch a fish. It's like shooting fish in a barrel. We can't just keep taking from the wild, but we also can't just rely on all farmed fish because there's two markets there.

Samantha Donovan: Chris O'Keefe from the Les Wilson Barramundi Discovery Centre in Coorumba, Queensland. That report from Abbey Halter and Emily Dobson.