December 2016—AQUACULTURE PERSPECTIVES

Cruise ships for Atlantic salmon: The value of aquaculture reaches new heights

by Bill Manci

There is an air of maturity about the aquaculture industry these days. We are now hearing and seeing things that, 30 and 40 years ago, would be the stuff of legend or drug-induced hallucination.

Without seeing it for myself, I don't think I would necessarily believe it. On more than one occasion, I have seen news stories about companies interested in applying for licenses to raise Atlantic salmon on ocean-going vessels.

These ships are not small, and the interest in them appears to be quite profound. A company called Pure Atlantic and 35 other companies have applied for licenses to raise Atlantic salmon inside the 200-nautical mile territorial limit of Norway.

This is not a vessel that simply tows cages through the water from one spot to the next. Instead it is a ship that is capable of fully (or almost fully) surrounding the fish-containment areas, while at the same time using the ship's sailing speed to move new water in and old water out.

The point of all of this activity is not just a conceptual exercise or a trial balloon. Most decidedly, the point is that these companies feel compelled to do this, and they expect to make money—sailing fish around the North Atlantic!

The other numbers here are not small. The 36 licenses amount to just less than 250,000 metric tons of production per year.

Why would companies do this? There are a number of reasons.

First, escaping the chains of coastal areas has several advantages. You move away from coastal pollution and red tides, which are toxic to fish, or at least render them unfit for harvest.

You remove the threat of pollution from the production facility of coastal waters that may be environmentally sensitive.

You move away from areas with high populations of sea lice—the parasites that have wreaked havoc on salmon producers for many decades.

You move from a fixed location, and to areas that are potentially more ideal for the production of Atlantic salmon. For example, water that is warmer, or colder, or whatever other water quality condition you prefer or suits your seasonal needs best.

You are fully capable of protecting the fish from predators and other nuisances, given the ship literally surrounds the fish.

You are able to move away from storms and other violent weather and, using the vessel's speed through the water, you can completely control the rate at which water moves through the fish-containment areas.

The paid staff and crew occupy the vessel along with the fish, for a more secure and watched-over grow-out period.

Many of these vessels are conceived to be self-sufficient, with their own ways to produce renewable power (e.g., windmills), and certainly can house the crew and fish in comfort, with ample room for feed and other supplies and services.

At this point, I don't claim to fully understand the economics of this approach, but salmon producers are smart and motivated.

Certainly, there is no doubt the salmon industry is expanding and growing. But suitable coastal production locations are becoming harder to find, and those coastal areas currently in use can be fraught with danger from disease, poor water quality, predators, lack of elbow room, and other perils.

So, in all probability, the "cruise ship" concept makes technical and financial sense.

One of my favorite sayings is "There is a difference between intellect and wisdom." An analog of that phrase is "Some of the smartest people I know have no common sense."

Let's hope all of these virtues apply in this situation. I think they do.

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