

Aquaculture industry set to be a boon for Northern Australian economy

May 29 2020



Credit: James Cook University

Northern Australian aquaculture is set to increase its production five-fold to exceed \$1.34 billion in value and produce more than five times its current volume of fish, prawns and other seafood products within the next decade—according to a new Cooperative Research Centre for Developing Northern Australia (CRCNA) report published today.

The Northern Australian aquaculture situational analysis report also found the growth of the industry would create 2,340 direct new jobs, at a range of skill levels—if the industry worked together to overcome identified challenges and capitalise on the opportunities outlined in the study.

CRCNA CEO Jed Matz said the research, led by James Cook University (JCU), has for the first time clearly articulated a future vision for the whole Northern Australian aquaculture industry.

"The project team has engaged with more than 400 industry players from across the aquaculture sector, including those from Indigenous communities.

"The outcome of this engagement is the delivery of a set of strategic and well-supported recommendations not only focussed on addressing impediments but also providing solutions to these challenges," he said.

JCU Professor Dean Jerry said the willingness of industry participants to contribute to the research provided an unprecedented insight into the current state of play of the north Australian sector.

"The opportunity for the development of Northern Australia's aquaculture industry is vast, with between 500,000 to 700,000 hectares suitable for marine farming in earthen and lined ponds and 50 times that available for freshwater operations.

"Our best-case scenario outlined in this report is based on better utilisation of the available areas for expansion and growth of on-shore and off-shore facilities.

"A more coordinated approach across the sector is needed to support stronger biosecurity protocols and [infrastructure investment](#), good

RD&E and production outcomes, strong marketing efforts and an increase in global demand to fully realise our 2030 vision," he said.

Robert Bell from commercial aquaculture advisors Blueshift Consulting said having a strategic industry plan will help the sector and the government attract investment in commercially viable projects.

"The key to success is matching the right species, systems, critical-scale infrastructure and market accessibility with the right investors, financial structures and terms. Further, [government policy](#) and facilitation, R&D, aquaculture operators, investors, and local communities must also align with Northern Australia's natural and strategic advantages.

"We now have a strong body of evidence to support decision-making processes and to highlight what has and has not worked commercially across these areas in the past and what needs to change to ensure success moving forward," Mr Bell said.

In addition to more significant biosecurity support and more infrastructure investment, the report highlighted the role Traditional Owners had to play in the industry's future.

Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) Chairperson Eddie Fry said cross-sector collaboration and investment is vital to increase Indigenous participation in the aquaculture sector, especially as Indigenous Australians are responsible for managing 45 percent of land and sea country in Northern Australia.

"Aquaculture has been practiced for thousands of years by Indigenous Australians and understanding how communities value fishing resources and fishing access is a key component to achieving greater participation of Indigenous people in commercial fishing.

"By translating traditional rights and interests into tangible economic and social benefits for communities, Indigenous Australians can achieve far higher levels of economic participation and wealth creation through employment, investment and enterprise development.

"We look forward to capitalising on the opportunities outlined in the report and continuing our support of Indigenous Australians to attract co-investment in commercially viable aquaculture projects that align with community aspirations," Mr Fry said.

Professor Jerry said a vital lesson taken from the research project was the team's approach to gathering the data and ensuring they engaged with the right people from across the industry.

An approach that he thinks could be applied to other industry sectors—not just in Australia.

"The team's approach in stakeholder engagement and the analytical methodologies for this report could easily translate to examine the developmental potential and challenges of other primary industries, or for understanding the steps for further development of aquaculture in Australia's southern climes or our regional neighbours".

The Northern Australian aquaculture situational analysis study has delivered seven strategic recommendations:

Recommendation 1. Bolster Biosecurity

Industry stakeholders prioritised bolstered biosecurity as the primary project recommendation. Furthermore, biosecurity is perceived as a critical issue not only for the aquaculture industry (producers) but also for wild fishers, recreational fishers and the Indigenous community. Both exotic and endemic pathogens and parasites are recognised as

posing a risk to the aquaculture industry in northern Australia.

Recommendation 2. Build skills to meet industry growth needs

The recommendation suggests improvements in the existing aquaculture education and training system, increased industry input to and monitoring of education/training delivered, mechanisms to attract more people to the sector, pathways for engagement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and the urgent need to enhance the skilled migrant worker visa conditions and programs.

Recommendation 3. Market Development and Access

In a phase of industry expansion, the stakeholders have prioritised market development and access in order to understand the potential impact of higher production volumes and to inform market strategy. Activities suggested including improved access to seafood trade data and understanding of domestic and international markets.

Recommendation 4. Match and target RD&E to key industry needs and outcomes

For Northern Australia, the recommendation focusses on increased collaboration across sectors and jurisdictions, improved extension (translation) of research, and evaluation of RD&E to ensure benefit (e.g. improved production efficiency on-farm).

Recommendation 5: Facilitate infrastructure development for key Aquaculture Development Hubs

The establishment of aquaculture development areas and zones by governments has provided an important stimulus to industry development. The planning of hubs is considered a task for government agencies in conjunction with industry, ideally with the oversight of a Northern Australian aquaculture governance body. Suggested candidate locations for Hub investment are summarised in on page 84 of the report.

Recommendation 6. Build the Northern Australian aquaculture industry as a means for Indigenous economic development and independence.

Indigenous Australians are responsible for managing 45% of the land and sea country in northern Australia. There are multiple avenues for Indigenous communities to engage with aquaculture. An important step is understanding if a community is interested and the communication of what an aquaculture business is, how it works, and how they might want to be involved. This involves engaging communities and developing sensible and realistic business concepts that deal with biology, business and culture constraints.

Recommendation 7. Stronger and adaptive governance of the Northern Australian aquaculture industry

More work is needed by industry and government stakeholders to clarify a body/structure that will improve [aquaculture](#) governance and development in Northern Australia. A short consultancy project and roundtable workshop is recommended, with delegates based on the advisory group that established the terms of reference for the situational analysis project (a government representative from each jurisdiction and

representation of major industry associations).

Provided by CRCNA

Citation: Aquaculture industry set to be a boon for Northern Australian economy (2020, May 29)
retrieved 6 May 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2020-05-aquaculture-industry-boon-northern-australian.html>

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