

Chilean scallop farms devastated by tsunami

25 April 2011, by Paulina Abramovich



Chilean fishing boats in "Caleta Tumbes" cove, Concepcion, some 519 km south of Santiago, in 2009. Thousands of miles from the shores of Japan across the Pacific Ocean, Chilean shellfish farmers are facing an uncertain future after a giant wave traveled the seas and washed away their scallop beds.

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"I don't think I can carry on. Too much has been lost. I had all the scallops I could wish for, and now, look," said fisherman Patricio, shaking his head in despair.

Tongoy, some 450 kilometers (290 miles) north of the capital Santiago, stands on part of the scenic Chilean coast which was put on alert on March 11 after a catastrophic earthquake in Japan triggered a massive tsunami.

The huge wave devastated entire towns in northeast Japan and left more than 27,000 people dead or missing. Nearly 131,000 people are still living in [emergency shelters](#) while many others are staying with relatives and friends.

In Chile, the alert was lifted after just 24 hours.

Only a few relatively weak waves had come ashore and authorities confidently proclaimed that there had been no victims and no damage.

But despite its 17,000-kilometer (10,500-mile) journey from Japan, the strength of the wave remained very real here, packing enough force to toss aside blocks of concrete weighing nearly a tonne.

It was under these blocks that the Tongoy fishermen hung their nets holding the scallops in their fan-shaped shells until the shellfish reach maturity, a lengthy, time-consuming two-year process.



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"Never did I imagine that this would cause so much damage," said Tongoy shellfish farmer Eduardo Briones. "We thought the wave would die out before reaching us, or that it would be a small wave."

"But it was an underwater current that tumbled everything, leaving it all upside down," he added, describing the tangled nets and shellfish which had been ready to harvest, now sitting at the bottom of the bay.

Local authorities have not yet estimated the value of the loss of the Tongoy shellfish, but the local press has put the figure at \$6 million, and fishermen say between 50 and 100 percent of their total production was destroyed.

It's a devastating blow to this small village of Tongoy Bay which has been the center for scallop farming in Chile since the 1980s.

The rise of the scallop farms marked a turning point in the fortunes for the 5,000 inhabitants as local fishermen began to raise mollusks to meet growing world demand. Local fishing traditions, more risky and dangerous, fell into decline.

In 2006, one kilo (2.2 pounds) of scallops fetched as much as \$15. But the price has dropped to \$8.30 in recent years, pushed down by competition from neighboring Peru to the north, the principal supplier to hungry European markets.

The price of Peruvian scallops is kept low thanks to a cheaper labor force and better sea conditions for raising the shellfish, said Franklin Munoz, from the Sacmar shellfish company.

Two of his competitors were forced to close last year, with the loss of some 700 jobs. Now only five [shellfish](#) factories remain, compared with 11 during the height of the boom, supported in part by strong Chilean demand.

"But we can't continue," said Briones. Like his fellow fishermen, he sees no other alternative but to return to Tongoy's more traditional fishing customs -- taking their boats out to sea each day.

It may well be that a force of nature which swelled on the other side of the unpredictable ocean has sounded the death knell for the once lucrative scallop industry here.

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