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Intelligence

New year wishes for health and seafood

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Positive messaging and educating women should help seafood gain traction

Improved training for seafood retailing joined a review of mercury risks in seafood on the author's wish list.

As I write this column at the end of 2013, it is the time to reflect on the year and consider what strategic issues on which to concentrate in 2014. Bearing in mind this column is about increasing seafood consumption and getting recognition for the incredible health benefits of seafood, here are my three wishes for 2014:

1. One issue continually raised to put people off seafood is mercury. My wish is that a review of the methylmercury limits set by the CODEX Alimentarius is undertaken and that the risk profile is changed dramatically, thus taking mercury out of the equation.
2. The Global Seafood Retail Development program will change the face of the "window of the industry" to ensure that we professionalize the capability of the retail industry and create an avenue for consistent, positive messages to go globally to consumers.
3. Increase consistent, quality education to girls and women about the unique and special benefits of seafood.

Mercury issue

As I have said many times, the topic of mercury is often used in scare tactics – typically by anti-seafood organizations. But it is such a minor issue that it needs to be taken out of the decision-making equation when consumers buy seafood. It is high time governments acted on this issue and insisted on a review and changes in the risk profile.

There are many reasons this needs to be done. I gave many in my last column, but here are a few more.

From a scientific point of view, risk from seafood is related to how much you consume, and since the original suggested values were defined many years ago, much more science became available. As reported in a recently published seven-year-long study by Dr. Nick Ralston and colleagues, current U.S. Food and Drug Administration methods for developing seafood consumption guidelines may not provide an accurate assessment of seafood safety. Ralston developed the "selenium health benefit Value" criterion, which predicts risks or benefits of seafood species based on methylmercury and selenium content. None of this work was available when the original decisions were made.

It has been brought to my attention that the excess of selenium in some tuna species has a positive health benefit and is therefore more likely to prevent methylmercury toxicity than contribute to it. This integrated consideration of the elements' molar ratios provides an improved safety standard for seafood and environmental risk assessment that appears more useful than the criteria based on evaluation of methylmercury concentrations alone.

As my great friend Professor Michael Crawford said: "The reason for methylmercury toxicity is it takes out selenium, and the selenium proteins are some of the strongest protectors of the brain. There is so much selenium in fish like tuna that the methylmercury is powerless. If the contrary were true, the Japanese and others on traditional seafood diets would have the highest death rate from coronary heart disease. They have the lowest! This is either sheer ignorance or willful attack.

"You have to ask why people attack fish and not beef poultry, dairy, etc. But go to the FAO website, and you will see that fish accounts for only a small portion of dioxin intake, as most of it lands on the grass and crops, so the bulk of dioxin intake is from vegetables, dairy, beef, poultry. So why pick on fish?"

Additionally, aquaculture is becoming the predominant harvest method for seafood, and fish to fish ratios have totally changed. We are no longer talking about eating ocean predators like we used to. Thus, the risk is minimized further.

Positive messaging

Sometimes it is important to be repetitive to get a point across. I referenced in the last issue the need to "raise the bar" in seafood retailing to increase seafood consumption. While we need to have a global approach, it is essential that retailers take some responsibility to ensure that their staff have relevant skills and knowledge. Excuses of high staff turnover or limited time behind the counter cannot be acceptable, especially when the retailers are demanding so much more from the industry.

Changing the interface with consumers and giving them consistent, positive information would be a solid education platform that makes a difference. Making shopping for seafood a pleasurable experience and empowering consumers with sound advice is definitely the way to go.

I love the work of Dr. Shakuntala Thilsted at WorldFish Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh, who takes a different approach to nutrition advice. She highlights the importance of nutrients and especially micronutrients in small fish based on the work she has done in Bangladesh.

“The amounts of nutrients and proteins in fish varies greatly by species, but small, dried indigenous fish, when consumed whole, are one of the best ways to consume a concentrated amount of these important nutrients,” Thilsted said. “They are also a good source of essential fats and DHA.”

Further, she said: “Although aquaculture has taken off in many less-developed countries, the fish species farmed tend not to be these most nutritious indigenous species, which can help improve the lives of many women and young children domestically. Instead, they tend to be fish which have a high market demand in export markets.

“An example is the species mola in Bangladesh. This is an indigenous fish that contains a very high amount of vitamin A, but the dominant farmed species in the country are tilapia and carp, which are less nutritious but are farmed because they have a higher market value.”

So, following this advice, it is clear that aquaculture therefore needs to start working to increase the consumption of nutrient-rich fish, ensure the year-round availability of these fish and ensure that these fish are accessible to women.

Educating women

Education of young women, girls and even grandmothers, who in many societies play a pivotal role in education, is a must. Thilsted talks of how aquaculture can contribute to giving children the best start in life and help raise a country’s gross domestic product (GDP).

I have mentioned this in previous columns, but the “1,000 days” project promotes good nutrition for mother and child during the first critical 1,000 days of life. The period covers the nine months during pregnancy and the first months of life out of the womb.

As Thilsted highlighted: “The good health and nutrition of a woman during pregnancy and breastfeeding can be linked to eating nutritious fish. Good nutrition from fish during pregnancy also leads to optimal birth weight, good brain development and generally sets the child off to a good start in life. Similarly, it has been found that poor nutrition in early life can negatively impact the overall economic development of a country. Improved nutrition can increase a country’s GDP by 2 to 3 percent a year.”

None of these wishes are too outlandish – all of them would have enormous impacts on seafood consumption. Let us see how we go. If we can get some traction on all of these wishes, this industry will move forward like you have never seen.

(Editor’s Note: This article was originally published in the January/February 2014 print edition of the Global Aquaculture Advocate*.)*

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