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INFORMATION IMPACT ON CONSUMERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS AQUACULTURE: DISMANTLING THE MYTH ABOUT FARMED FISH FEEDING

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Introduction and Objectives:

In the previous EAS congress (2016), the first part of a project dealing with the perceptions towards aquaculture from a value chain approach was presented by Flos et al. (2016) and Escobar et al. (2016). One of the strongest conclusions was the lack of information about the production of farmed fish. Here we present the second part of the project, a Delphi study in order to confirm the perceptions that were previously reached.

With the objective to build up a positive image of aquaculture and taken into account the results found, the issue of "farmed fish feeding" was selected as one of the most important myths of aquaculture. Then the specific objectives were the following: 1) to build a sound and readable documentation on farmed fish feeding, 2) to test two different tools to give the information to consumers, in order to establish the better way to communicate the information, 3) to study whether the message could change the perception of consumers in front of the chosen myth, and 4) to provide the sector with documents and tools easily usable for the dissemination. This last objective is the ultimate goal of the project.

Method:

Delphi phase:

A two-round Delphi questionnaire was designed with the purpose of confirming the results of the first stage of our study (Flos et al 2016, Escobar et al 2016). The questionnaire was addressed to a group of experts of the fish value chain (consumers associations, wholesalers and retailers). Experts were sent a list of the subjects arisen in the previous study to ask their degree of agreement or disagreement, (0 completely disagree, 100 completely agree), as well as the importance (0 no important, 100 very important). Then the mean and standard deviation for each question and variable (agreement and importance) considering all answers was calculated and sent to the experts. According to this information, they could change their previous opinion if they wanted. This was done in order to reach a maximum consensus.

Communication tool phase:

An information report on "farmed fish feeding" was designed in several steps: a) A complete scientifically sound and easily readable document was written, which included all the references that were needed to justify its contents, after several rounds of interdisciplinary experts' discussions (in the fields of aquaculture production, fish nutrition and health, genetics, economy and journalism). Afterwards, it was sent to experts from the industry, producers associations, fish feed producers and researchers in order to validate its content, b) later on, from this extended document a synthesis was written, while maintaining the rigorous information. The language used was also modified keeping in mind the target population (consumers). c) Two formats of communication tools were built, one as a simple written document and the other as an interactive documentary web (docuweb), where participants could play a more active role.

Survey phase:

A questionnaire was designed and a survey was launched to 300 Spanish consumers. The designed communications tools were displayed (150 consumers were exposed to each format). The consumers receive the survey online and they answer a list of questions related to fish consumption habits and about their perception on farmed fish feeding in one of the two formats. Later, once they have read it, they answer again the list of questions related to the myth, without the possibility to reach the first set of answers.

Results:

The Delphi questionnaire included 20 items to assess that were related to several topics: (1) market and price (8 items); (2) product quality (6 items); and, (3) other subjects including environmental impact (6 items).

The issues related to market and price were mainly positively assessed. However, the items related to product quality were perceived as mainly negative. Particularly, the following items were included: "Farmed fish feeding contains chemical products that can negatively affect human health", "Farmed fish feeding has a negative effect on the final quality of the product", "Society does not trust the production processes of aquaculture - food, medication, treatments-" and, "Society does not know the production processes of aquaculture -food, medication, treatments-". The only 2 items related to environmental issues were considered positively.

Taking into account the previous results, the myth of "farmed fish feeding" was selected as one of the most important myths of aquaculture. A full document on the subject was done after several work meetings of discussion of what and how to communicate to consumers, and the document was sent for validation to experts from science, industry and production sector, including their comments to improve the text. Then several syntheses were performed until a final document was obtained in a simple but rigorous document. This final communication tool included seven items, which were displayed in a positive approach. The contents of the document are specified below:

Title: 7 keys to know more what farmed fish eat.

1) Farmed fish receive a balanced diet.

2) Farmed fish food contains healthy and natural ingredients.

3) Fish are excellent raw ingredients for fish feeds.

4) Fish are very efficient in the conversion of food.

5) Fish farms apply prevention and welfare measures to guaranty fish health.

6) Farmed fish have a traceability guaranty, and

7) Farmed fish are tasty, healthy and beneficial.

These contents are already available in two formats, one as a simple document and the other in a docuweb format, which includes pictures as well as the need for the consumer to interact with it. But the contents are exactly the same in both formats. This is information ready to be disseminated to the general public, schools, journalists, etc.

Results of the survey will be presented and the comparison of the two methods will give information of the best way to provide information, and if the content of the message can change or not the perception of consumers.

References

Escobar, C., Flos, R., Carrassón, M., M. Constenla, F. Padrós, F. Piferrer, J.M. Gil, and L. Reig. 2016.Consumer's positive and negative perceptions towards aquaculture:a hybrid delphi approach. European Aquaculture Society Conference. "AE2016". Edimburg: p. 832.

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