



IntraFish

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Life without the WTO

You could perhaps say it is the rich countries' protection and subsidizing of their own agriculture that is the greatest hurdle to overcome for achieving a freer environment for global trading of seafood.

World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiations collapsed, and countries that want to trade with each other have lost their patience. They no longer are willing to wait for a solution from the WTO that seems unlikely to materialize. Instead, they are entering into bilateral free trade agreements.

At present, so many free trade agreements are being signed between individual countries a map of the world looks almost like a bowl of spaghetti, if you draw lines between countries that have signed these agreements.

As much free trade as possible is good, but we don't want to end up in a situation where the function the WTO has in regulating global trade is lost, not least because it is often small, poor countries that need agreements with larger and more powerful countries to sell their products.

Building of trade blocs also emerged as a result of a weakened WTO system. Recently, 16 countries in Southeast Asia and Japan reached agreement to investigate the possibility of building a new free trade giant.

Among the countries that could be part of this Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) organization are China, Japan, Australia, South Korea, India, and New Zealand.

This would be a potent organization that would have a powerful influence on world trade, and that would pose a real challenge for both the European Union and the United States.

The collapse of WTO talks has led to seafood countries entering into free trade agreements with countries that have significant levels of seafood consumption.

Professor Robert Scollay from Auckland, New Zealand, is an expert on free-trade agreements, and says it is by no means certain WTO negotiations will end in a new agreement.

He said he believes growth in the number of bilateral trade agreements will continue, regardless of any WTO outcome. He also sees a tendency toward the world dividing up of the world into three major trade blocs, one in America,

one in Europe and one in Asia.

The three regions account for around 90 percent of the world's economy.

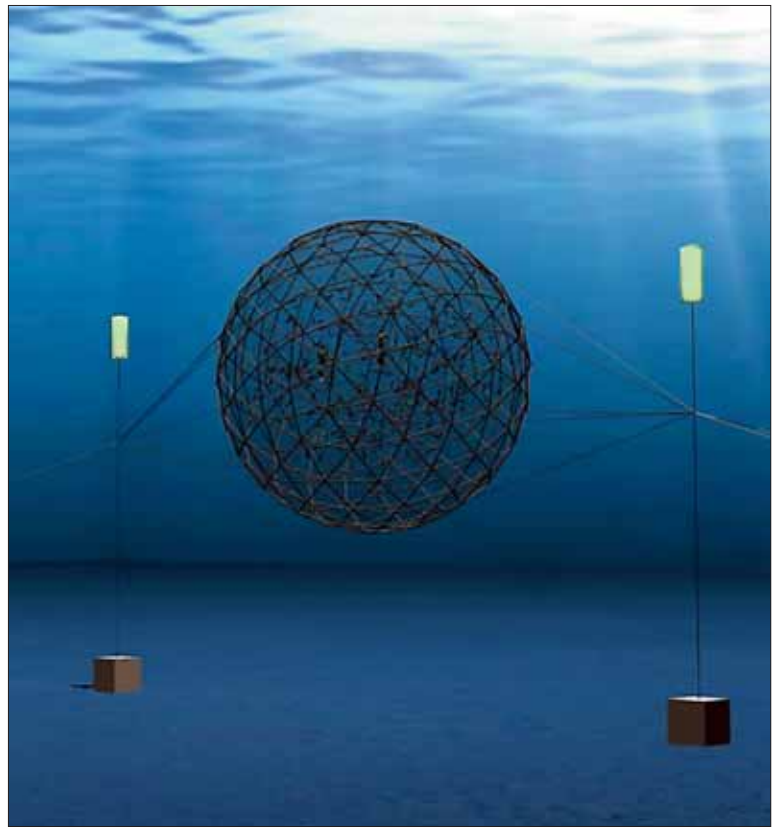
Scollay says in an interview in this issue of *IntraFish* there are too many free trade agreements, but this is an irreversible trend. For the world's seafood industry, this is a negative factor and means new challenges. The seafood industry must work hard, to a greater degree than previously, to promote its own interests in global trade. The industry should allocate money to ensure trade officials consider the seafood industry when entering into trade agreements or establishing new trade blocs.

The many national and international organizations in seafood must set market access for seafood higher up on their agendas, and they must get the authorities to obtain funding for the job of promoting greater visibility on the global arena.

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WAVE OF THE FUTURE: Will new open-ocean fish cages such as this one spur explosive growth in cobia farming?

Next big fish in the sea?

Has cobia's time finally arrived?

Seafood buyers are always looking for the next hit, that undiscovered fish that will become a top seller with consumers.

The past is filled with superstar fish, and the fame – and availability – of some of the fish faded fast once they were discovered.

Orange roughy, for example, is

tilapia, pangasius, blue swimming crab – this list of species that have exploded onto the seafood landscape over the last decade is dramatic.

So, what's the next hit? It's hard to say.

Certainly there is a great deal of anticipation surrounding farmed cod and halibut. Since these fish already are staples, they really don't qualify as the "next new fish."

In this issue, *IntraFish* journalist Lesley Rogers explores the prospects for cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*), a white-fleshed fish with a firm texture and excellent flavor.

Frankly, many expected cobia farming to be off and running in a big way by now. Cobia is making

a slower but steady surge in aquaculture, and growers still are predicting the tropical fish will one day be as popular as salmon.

What could help propel the fish into the mainstream is the fact much of the world's cobia farming is being done in open-ocean aquaculture operations, which are the new darlings of the global aquaculture industry.

It will be a few years before we know if cobia truly is the next hot fish.

"I don't think it's going to be tomorrow, but over the next few years it's really going to take off," said Brian O'Hanlon, owner of Snapperfarm Inc., a grower of cobia.



Opinion

JOHN FIORILLO
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"It will be a few years before we know if cobia truly is the next hot fish."

a victim of its own success. U.S. imports of the tasty fish from Down Under peaked at around 29 million pounds in 1997. Last year, imports were just over 11 million pounds.

Patagonian toothfish, aka Chilean sea bass, farmed salmon,



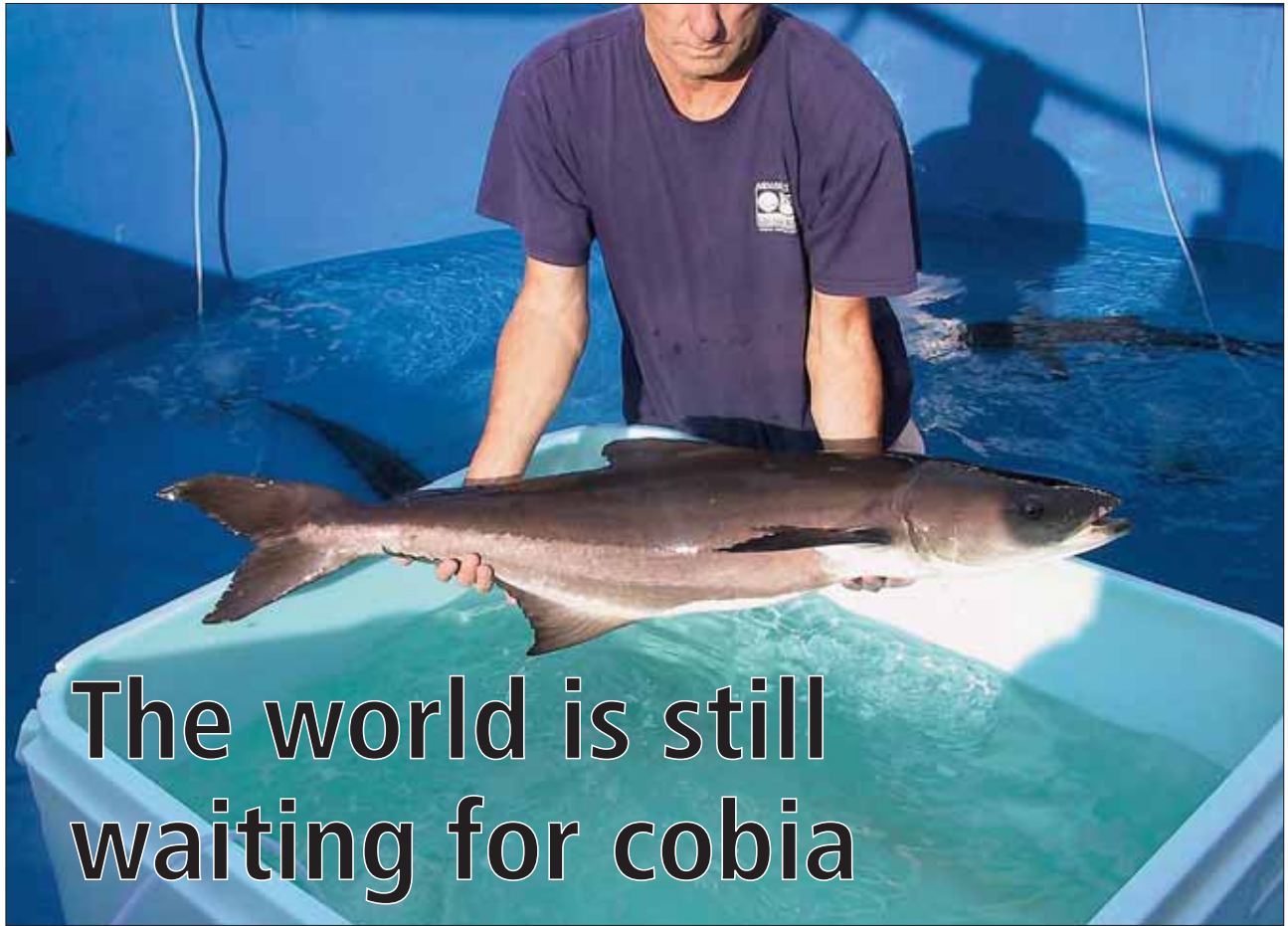
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The world is still waiting for cobia

HEADED TO MARKET: Cobia are known for their rapid growth, and take about one year to reach market size.

PHOTO: UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

Cobia farming is slow to develop, but farmers says they are on the verge of something big.

BY LESLEY ROGERS

Cobia - promised years ago to be the next trendy fish - is making a slow but steady surge, and growers are still predicting the tropical fish will one day be as popular as salmon.

Still a relative newcomer to the growing seafood market, cobia is difficult to harvest in the wild, and aquaculture producers are working to perfect the process of growing the fish in captivity.

Producers such as Brian O'Hanlon, owner of Snapperfarm Inc. in Culebra, Puerto Rico, said the cobia boom is just around the corner. O'Hanlon decided to grow



HOME SWEET HOME: Cobia farmer Snapperfarm Inc. installed wire mesh Aquapod net pens it says will help it increase fish production.

PHOTO: SNAPPERFARM INC.

cobia at an offshore site in Puerto Rico in 2002. Every year, Snapperfarm doubles its production, and he's convinced once he and a handful of others perfect the growing system, cobia will become more common on menus and in global seafood markets.

"Demand has been pretty good," O'Hanlon said. "It was a challenge early on, getting familiar with it."

Quick growth

At his facility, O'Hanlon is limited by capacity and regulation. He's only allowed to produce 50 tons of cobia this year from his offshore site in the deep blue waters of the Caribbean Sea. As his company grows, he's refining the product and getting more efficient.

The juvenile cobia are obtained from a marine hatchery and then moved to deep-water cages.

When the fish reaches 10 pounds - roughly one year later - they are harvested using a specialized fish pump.

Cobia reach markets within 24 to 48 hours of their harvest, O'Hanlon said.

Cobia is noted for its quick growth rate and good flesh quality. Cost and availability have limited the fish to mostly white-tablecloth restaurants. Consequently, many consumers have yet to have their first taste of cobia.

A pelagic fish, it's found in tropical and temperate seas,

except for the eastern Pacific Ocean.

There is no significant wild fishery for cobia globally because adults often are solitary and frequently travel in the company of sharks.

While cobia have been difficult to capture in the wild, they are a highly prized catch. In Mexico, cobia is the fish of choice at weddings and celebrations.

As a game fish, the Florida cobia record is 103 pounds, 12 ounces. The world record, held by Australia, is a 135-pound, 9 ounce cobia. Cobia feed primarily on crabs, squid and other fish.

Living up to the hype

The Aquaculture Center in the Florida Keys is producing cobia, and Marine Farms Belize Ltd. is launching a new cobia venture. While cobia production is just taking off in the West, the fish has had success in Taiwanese ocean cages.

Daniel Benetti, University of Miami professor and director of the university's aquaculture program, calls these companies "pioneers" in cobia production.

There has been plenty of hype about cobia over the last five years, and shortly, the fish will start living up to it, Benetti said.

A few years ago, Benetti claimed cobia might overtake salmon in popularity. "We still believe it's going to be really, really huge. But there's been a learning curve," Benetti said.

Cobia: Fact File

- Cobia (*Rachycentron canadum*) exhibit a brownish coloration grading to white on the belly with two darker brown horizontal bands on the flanks.
- Seven to nine extremely sharp, retractable dorsal spines. Firm, white tasty flesh.
- In the wild, the fish travel alone or in small schools in tropical and temperate seas, except for the eastern Pacific Ocean.
- Commercial farming of cobia began in the early 1990s; there are a handful of aquaculture locations, including Taiwan, Puerto Rico and Florida.
- Known for its rapid growth rate, cobia live up to 15 years in the wild feed on fish, crab, shrimp and squid.

"The survival rates are still very low to make it work economically."

At the hatchery level, only about 5 percent to 10 percent of the fish survive, Benetti said. It takes time to work the kinks out of the production system, he said.

Researches still are learning the characteristics of the fish. Cobia are very active and fast-growing, and the fish is susceptible to parasites and bacteria.

Year-round supply?

By early 2007, Snapperfarm plans to install additional cages and increase production, with the hopes of providing year-round cobia to markets in the United States and Puerto Rico, O'Hanlon said.

The cobia are grown natural, free of hormones, pigments, drugs and antibiotics, he said.

Last spring, Snapperfarm

installed wire mesh Aquapod net pens O'Hanlon said are helping the company more effectively grow the fish.

The Aquapod uses marine-grade galvanized steel wire netting, and is virtually predator-proof. The pens were developed by Ocean Farm Technologies Inc.

"From a market standpoint, it's an excellent fish," O'Hanlon said. "There are still some challenges that remain. It's far more challenging to produce than tilapia." Cobia should become a more common table fish in the next five to 10 years, Benetti said.

In the meantime, O'Hanlon said he's used a lot of one-on-one marketing to find niches for his cobia.

"I don't think it's going to be tomorrow," he said, "but over the next few years, it's really going to take off."