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Scotland to have first commercial tuna farm

A project at Ardtoe may answer demand for sustainable tuna



Mark Macaskill

Scotland could be the first country in the world to farm tuna on a commercial scale.

Scientists from Stirling and Strathclyde universities are looking at ways of breeding and harvesting the fish to meet the massive demand for its meat.

A £250,000 pilot project backed by the European Fisheries Fund is scheduled to take place this summer at Ardtoe marine laboratory near Fort William. There, scientists will attempt to breed albacore tuna, a species common in UK waters, from about 150 adult specimens caught off the coast of west Scotland.

They will monitor how the fish adapt to captivity to establish the best conditions for breeding. If successful, the first tuna farm could be operational in Scotland by 2011.

Previous attempts to farm tuna on a commercial scale have failed because of the fish's size and the speed at which it swims. Reaching speeds of up to 25mph, the tuna invariably injure themselves when they collide with the walls of the farm's enclosure.

One solution is to reduce impacts by using powerful water currents to control the direction and speed of fish in the tanks.

Scientists from Strathclyde university have been using crash-test dummies to assess how the fish will react in a closed environment.

"The public demand for sustainable tuna is huge," said Alex Muhlholz, managing director of Oceanic Tuna Limited, which is leading the project.

"Breeding the fish on a commercial scale is the holy grail but we need to deal with a whole range of issues such as mortalities, cleaning the tanks and ensuring the welfare of the fish.

"We've decided to base this in Scotland because the calibre of expertise here is phenomenal. This would be something new for the aquaculture industry in Scotland. We are looking to develop a commercial industry here."

Muhlholz said by siting the tuna farm inland many of the problems that have dogged the salmon and trout farming industry would be avoided.

In January, about 6,500 salmon escaped from a sea site at Oldany, near Drumbeg. Last year, 4,000 farmed trout escaped into the Awe, one of Scotland's most famous salmon rivers. The fear is that escaped fish will eat young native salmon, and that they will dilute the gene pool of their wild cousins. Ministers described the escape as "completely unacceptable".

Bruce Sandison, a leading anti-salmon farm campaigner, welcomed the development. "If the tuna farm is using closed containment on land, there is no possibility of an impact on the marine environment or freshwater lochs, and that is to be welcomed," he said.

"What puzzles me is if this can be done for tuna, why can't it be done for salmon? It's about time the Scottish government stopped encouraging polluting fish farms in our coastal waters."

Meanwhile, Japan's insatiable appetite for sushi has spawned a booming business of tuna-fattening throughout the Mediterranean that is threatening the survival of the Atlantic bluefin tuna.

Wild fish are sent to tuna "ranches" where they are fattened up before being killed and sold. However, the industry is in decline amid concern many of the oldest bluefin tuna fishing grounds, especially in the western Mediterranean, have been heavily over-fished.

A 2006 report by the World Wildlife Fund suggested that around Spain's Balearic islands, catches of bluefin tuna had plummeted by 85% in a decade. Many ranches have closed as a result.

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