

MURRAY COD – AQUACULTURE LOOKS PROMISING

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The Murray cod is a native fish endemic to the Murray-Darling Basin. It is one of the world's largest freshwater fish species, and has been known to reach a maximum length of 1.8m and a weight of 113.5 kg.

The distribution and abundance of the Murray cod has declined markedly since European settlement. It is not clear what has caused this decline, but modifications to rivers for hydro-electric, flood mitigation and irrigation schemes, increased pollution from domestic, agricultural and industrial sources, over-fishing, and impacts of introduced fish species have been implicated.

The Murray cod is highly valued by recreational anglers because of its size, its value for sport fishing and its taste. Commercially caught Murray cod is also highly sought after on wholesale fish markets where it fetches premium prices. Since the close of the NSW commercial Murray cod fishery in September 2001, the commercial Murray cod fishery is now restricted to South Australia.

The availability of wild caught Murray cod from South Australia is highly variable and seasonal, and rarely satisfies the market demand for this fish. Over the past few years, a number of private fish farms in Victoria, South Australia and NSW have been involved in the commercial culture of market-sized Murray cod to help satisfy this demand. These farms have encountered many problems that have prevented the regular supply of a quality, market-ready product.

In 1999, the Marine and Freshwater Resources Institute (MAFRI) in Snobs Creek initiated a 3-year project to develop and evaluate best practice techniques for the commercial production of Murray Cod under intensive and semi-intensive tank and pond based growout conditions.

The project has a number of objectives, all aimed at improving the quality of commercially grown Murray cod. In particular, researchers have been working towards developing effective husbandry techniques and fish health guidelines to ensure the viability of Murray cod aquaculture. High-energy artificial diets are also being trialed, along with development of more efficient feeding practices for the tank reared fish. Finally the project will attempt to identify new domestic and/or export opportunities for the commercially cultured fish and will assess the economic viability of this industry.

This project is already showing extremely promising results. Growth and feeding trials have shown that plate sized Murray cod (about 600grams) can be achieved within 12 months.

The project is receiving support from existing farmers in Victoria, SA, Qld and NSW, who are keen to improve their current farming methods and to identify potential new markets for their product. There is a potential to exceed a minimum \$30 million per annum if Asian export markets can be attracted to the product.

The provision of a more reliable supply of Murray cod of high and consistent quality will provide added benefits to the end point consumers. Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, the increased availability of farmed Murray Cod may reduce the pressure on the vulnerable wild stocks. This project is jointly funded by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation and Fisheries Victoria.