

2014 02 11

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Comments on fieldwork among Alabama catfish farmers in 2004 and 2005.

As the world ecosystem comes under more stress, it is important to make sure agriculture, agricultural industry, and non-agricultural industry are done so as not to hurt the environment, and to help if possible. Here, the term "ecosystem" includes both the non-human natural environment and human social environment. For convenience, the term "industry" can include agriculture, as, for example, "the hog industry".

One of the most practical ways to insure that agriculture and industry get along with the environment is to set up standards for how firms can operate. These guidelines have various names; in agriculture, they are commonly called "codes of conduct". NGOs and governmental agencies have sought agricultural industries that get along well with the ecosystem, so as to develop guidelines for the industries, so as to use the industries as examples for industry in general. You can find out about recent progress in this field by searching "codes of conduct" on the Internet or searching for particular industries such as dairy, beef ranching, catfish aquaculture, shrimp aquaculture, and salmon aquaculture.

The Thai shrimp industry was a good candidate for codes of conduct; for comments on it, see elsewhere on this site, or look on the Internet.

The Alabama catfish industry also was a good candidate for codes of conduct. About 2003, the NGO "World Wildlife Fund" (WWF) wished to work with the West Alabama catfish farmers to set up guidelines. As part of that effort, the WWF contacted Claude E. Boyd of the Dept. of Fisheries of Auburn University in Auburn, AL to conduct baseline research on the industry, including both natural and social impacts. At the time, I was working for Boyd, and I had visited the farmers many times, so he sub-contracted with me to do the research and write the report. The result is on this website. The report was done for WWF use internally but the purpose for which the report was to serve (guidelines) has long since passed its window of opportunity, and conditions have changed, so it will do little harm, and might do much good, to offer the report here.

It is useful to know why the Alabama catfish industry was a promising candidate, and what happened so that the process did not end in guidelines as the WWF originally envisioned. I know only a bit. I relate what I do know. I advise curious parties to contact catfish farmers, Claude Boyd, WWF, or Aaron McNevin (of WWF at the time).

The Alabama catfish farmers already had a strong organization that included over 90% of the surface area used for catfish raising. They had close ties to the Alabama Farmers Federation (ALFA). They had already set up standards for many environmental issues as part of a long-standing good relation with the Alabama State Department of Environment Management (ADEM). The catfish farmers were not wealthy but they were comfortable at the time, and so could afford to work within reasonable guidelines. Contrary to popular anti-capitalist stereotypes, the catfish industry got along well with the natural environment of West Alabama. In some ways, catfish farming was a reversion to wetlands and prairie that had covered

West Alabama before plantation farming and agribusiness. Also contrary to popular stereotypes about industry and about ethnic relations in the South, catfish farmers got along well with the larger society in West Alabama. While catfish farmers did not aggressively seek Affirmative Action, they did provide much-needed jobs to people of all races, and the working conditions were generally good even in the processing plants (except for situations in processing plants outside Alabama in the past that do not matter here). Catfish farmers provided as many benefits for their workers as were possible, and followed standard Southern ideas of looking out for workers as part of providing benefits and providing good working conditions. All-in-all, catfish farming in West Alabama was a great success story. It should have been easy to set up guidelines.

Before going on, I need to stress a point that I made to the catfish farmers before doing this fieldwork, during the fieldwork, and after. Eventually some sort of guidelines, with inspection, and with certification, is almost inevitable. Either guidelines-inspection-certification can come from the industry itself or it will come from government agencies. I prefer lower-levels to higher-levels when possible. I prefer local self-government to national government when possible. If industries do not regulate themselves in a way that is acceptable to consumers, sooner or later, national governments will regulate them. Depending on what happens to the global ecosystem in the future, if consumers can afford it, consumers will not eat food that has not been raised under guidelines, inspected, and certified; and retail stores will not sell food that has not been properly raised, inspected, and certified.

After delivering the report in 2005, I was not a part of the process seeking guidelines anymore. This is what I understand:

-In theory, an industry can set up any guidelines it wishes, and can be inspected and certified as long as it follows its own guidelines. In practice, an industry has to set up guidelines that reasonably insure that the industry is getting along with the natural and social environments.

-When an industry sets up guidelines, it arranges for compliance to be certified by an outside objective inspecting agency. To show that the industry is working under guidelines, and has been inspected, the industry usually adds a small symbol or "logo" to its products.

-To make the process of certification worthwhile to participating farmers, farmers hope that products with an obvious certification label can get a slightly higher retail. Americans are usually willing to pay up to 5% more for "clean" food generally; Americans are willing to pay a higher increase for food that children likely will consume such as milk.

-For the catfish industry to justify the price of using guidelines and certifying compliance, it needed to use a logo that the public would recognize and would lead to slightly higher prices.

-The catfish industry wished to incorporate the WWF logo in its certification logo because the WWF logo is widely known and respected, but the WWF could not allow that. The WWF does not lend its logo to any agency other than the WWF.

-So the catfish industry sought a private agency to certify its compliance with its guidelines. The catfish industry picked an inspection-and-certification agency that is respected by within the aquaculture industry

in general and by many aquaculture producers in particular (not named here). Unfortunately, that agency is not widely accepted among NGOs because of its association with many aquaculture industries (fair or not fair) and that agency is not known by the public. Thus using that agency would not guarantee that the catfish industry could expect any higher retail price to cover its increased costs.

-The catfish farmers worried that they could not comply with some common guidelines, such as making the ponds safe against poisoning by enemy agents.

-Likely sensing something important on the horizon of food retailing, large retailers, particularly Walmart, became involved. I know little of this aspect. When large retailers get involved in an industry, because they can control the last (retail) sale, they tend to exert control over the entire industry. This potential for control makes producers uneasy.

-About 2006 and afterwards, Vietnam and China entered American fish markets aggressively. While Vietnam did not produce the same species as American catfish, still the Vietnamese fish was sold as "catfish" and undercut sales of American catfish. China did produce exactly the same species. The price of catfish fell drastically. The catfish farmers lost their reasonable profit margin, and many of them went bankrupt.

-With cheap international competition, there was no incentive anymore to institute guidelines, inspection, certification, and logo labeling. In fact, if guidelines had any costs, they would be a significant burden. Only if the same standards were applied to international producers, and non-compliant producers were denied certification and marketing, maybe by denying importation of non-certified food, would it be worthwhile for American catfish producers to institute guidelines, inspection, certification, and logo labeling.

For whatever reasons, the process stopped.

As I was preparing my website in early 2014, the American Congress passed an Agriculture Bill. The Bill contained a provision for the federal government to inspect catfish farms and catfish. I don't know details. The provision might have of the following motivations; I just don't know.

-Consumer concern with all food products

-Consumer concern over aquaculture in general

-Consumer concern with catfish in particular

-Consumer concern over imported food that is not raised in harmony with the natural environment or with worker justice

-An indirect way for the state to control food imports

-An indirect way for the United States to influence China

-Make US catfish were acceptable in countries with strict standards, such as in Europe and Japan, and so protect US exports

-Send a message to other industries such as cattle and feed production

In any case, the provision results in direct high-level government control over an industry, and it blocks low-level self-control. I am sorry about that. This is what I had feared, and what I had tried to warn the catfish farmers about. I suspect, if the catfish farmers had instituted guidelines a long time ago, this control by the federal government might have been avoided or might have been imposed only on suspect imports.

Other industries should learn what they can from the catfish case. They should work to make sure they get along with the natural and social environments. They should adopt guidelines that everybody can understand, and everybody can see will make the industry get along. They should regulate themselves, get inspected in a public and transparent way by a reputable acceptable inspection agency, and so get certified in a public and transparent way.

The Thai shrimp industry did much the same as the Alabama shrimp farmers. The Thai government has not yet forced standards and inspection on the Thai shrimp industry. But, if the Thai wish to continue to export to the United States, Europe, and Japan, eventually the Thai government might have to impose standards on the shrimp industry.