In Dagupan, 'bangus' start to eat healthy again

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DAGUPAN CITY—LOCAL FISH POND operators are shifting back to the traditional way of raising *bangus* (milkfish)—the product that has placed this bustling coastal city on the country's food map.

They are now feeding their stocks with natural food locally known as *lablab* (a type of algae), instead of commercial feed.

The results have been worth their while—lesser production expenses, better tasting *bangus* products that fetch better prices, and pollution-free rivers and ponds.

"I think it won't be long before all of us will go back to the use of natural food [for *bangus*] because of these," said Marcelino Fernandez, Liga ng mga Barangay (city federation) president and one of the city's biggest *bangus* growers.

There are about 70 fish pond operators who are growing *bangus* in 958 hectares of ponds in 31 villages here, aside from those who get to raise their stocks in fish pens and cages in rivers that crisscross Dagupan.

City agriculturist Emma Molina said the shift to the traditional method of growing *bangus* began in 2007 with the implementation of a comprehensive outreach program on fish breeding, a project of the Japan International Cooperation Agency.

Fernandez and another *bangus* grower, Councilor Alfredo Quinto Sr., volunteered for the project.

"The primary direction of the program was to look on the existing practices of our milkfish pond operators and encourage them to go back to the practice of using natural food during the initial stages of [fish] culture," Molina said.

Although the project is barely more than a year old and still in the demonstration stage, it has already drawn the interest of other fish pond operators in the city, Molina said.

FISHPOND owners and their helpers harvest 'bangus' (milkfish) in Dagupan City. PHOTOS BY KAY ZABLAN

"The experiences of Kapitan Lino (Fernandez) and Councilor Fred (Quinto) were brought up in a training of local pond operators, and about 20 of them initially followed suit," Molina said.

Fernandez said the reluctance of other pond operators to go back to the traditional *bangus* farming could be traced to the laborious and long period of pond preparation.

To prepare a pond, he said, it must first be purged of fish predators and has to be sun dried, a process that takes 10 to 15 days.

"In the past, we used chemicals to kill the predators," Fernandez said. "But since these chemicals have been banned by the FPA (Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority), we now use tea seed."

Tea seed is actually tobacco dust, composed of small pieces of leaves and stems that fall off dried tobacco leaves.

"It is spread over the dry pond bottom, then it's left there for three to four days to combine with the soil and to kill the predators," Molina said.

The tea seed is later plowed into the pond bottom, becoming an organic fertilizer. Then the pond will have to be dried again, and later, allow water to gradually come in for *lablab* to grow.

Lablab, an alga with an organic component, grows naturally on the bottom of shallow fertile ponds.

This natural food is said to be the reason pond-cultured milkfish in this city has a distinctive taste, compared to those fed with commercial feed.

"A milkfish that ate *lablab* really has a different taste," Fernandez said. "It also has a different shape. If the milkfish ate sufficient natural food, it has a rounded body. And when you grill it, it's juicy, tasty and has soft flesh."

In terms of competitiveness, Molina said, *bangus* grown in fish ponds are more expensive than those raised in pens or cages.

This is because, she said, many *bangus* lovers, especially Dagupeños, would not settle for anything less than a pond-raised milkfish.

"And they would pay the price for it," Molina said. "It's more because of the taste. The price becomes secondary as long as you're satisfied [with the product]."

In the end, using *lablab* to grow *bangus* would mean more profit to pond operators, Quinto said.

With commercial feed costing P600 a bag, a *bangus* grower would need at least 80 bags for a one-hectare pond with 5,000 pieces of *bangus* in it.

"It's true, you will have more yield. But your harvestable 250-gram *bangus* would already have a production cost ranging from P10 to P15 each. What about the labor cost and the pond rental?" Quinto said.

Molina said those using *lablab* have been able to cut production cost by 30 percent.

"And if many will adopt that, producers using natural food will have leverage," she said, referring to the prices superior milkfish would command. "So, those using commercial feed would have to think hard how they can compete in the price [of *bangus*]."

According to Molina, she and the pond operators hope to prevent the recurrence of a massive fish kill that happened here in 1997.

"Lessons are learned hard and they are costly," Molina said. "So, if you tell them now to go back to natural food, they know its implications."