

Short Report

Test Selling of Cultured Mullet at the Fish Market

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Mullet is the most highly appreciated fish by Tongan people, however, the mullet is constantly in short supply and cannot meet the strong demand. Therefore, a technical and economical feasibility study on the mullet culture has been taken up as one of the main objectives in the joint Tonga-Japan Aquaculture Research and Development Project. The project team has been conducting pen culture experiments on mullet, mostly *Liza macrolepis* with some *Mugil cephalus* and *Valamugil seheli*, in Fanga'uta Lagoon where salinity fluctuates in the range of 9-30‰ (Paongo, 1994). Although Tongans rank mullet caught in the open sea as the top grade fish in the market, it is not yet known whether they appreciate mullet which has been cultured in the brackish water of the lagoon with supplemental feeding. In this study, we sold on trial at Vuna Wharf fish market, the pen-cultured mullet of 100 g in average body weight, to examine the consumer's response to the cultured mullet. Those fish were cultured for about 7 months in the pen with supplemental feeds consisting of powdered pumpkin and copra.

251 mullets were harvested from the 20 m x 20 m pen with gill netting, on December 12-14, 1994. Staff members of

the Ministry of Fisheries tasted two fish each of *L. macrolepis* and *M. cephalus* and did not find the taste different from that of the natural mullet. On December 16, 1994, 237 mullets were placed in a seawater filled plastic tank with aeration and were transported to the fish market alive. The fish were scooped with a hand net and put in a plastic bag upon the order of a customer. Each bag containing 2.5 kg of fish was sold at T\$ 10.00, that is T\$ 4.00/kg. The price was almost the same as the average price of T\$ 4.23/kg for the natural mullet sold at the market. Although it was raining heavily and the number of customers was much smaller than usual, all the mullet were completely sold within two hours. There were no comments from the customers on the taste of the fish later on. Therefore, we can conclude that the customers accepted the cultured mullet as equivalent to the natural mullet in taste. The consumers did not show any positive response to the live mullet and they seemed to feel that the number of fish was smaller when sold in a plastic bag than when sold in a string (the traditional way of selling fish in Tonga) even though the numbers were about the same. It may be better to sell cultured mullet in strings in future.

A large quantity of frozen mullet were imported from Australia and were sold at T\$ 4.5/kg at Tu'imatamoana fish market in August 1994. The sale of the fish was poor so the price was lowered gradually until it reached T\$ 2.0/kg in December 1994. The sale of the fish was still poor even at that price. The reason for the poor sales were: 1) Tongan people are not accustomed to consuming frozen mullet and 2) they have a preconception that fish caught in a river are tasteless. This experience shows that the import of frozen mullet from abroad does not seem to be a good solution to solve the short supply.

In conclusion, this study shows that mullet cultured in Fanga'uta Lagoon is readily accepted by the consumers, and

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if an economically feasible technique is developed, mullet culture is a promising solution to the problem of short supply.

Reference

Paongo, O. 1994. Water quality of Fanga'uta Lagoon as the site for mullet culture. Fish. Res. Bull. Tonga, 2: 7-17.