Much of the farm raised fresh fish consumed in the US is flown in from other countries

More than a dozen years ago we visited China to meet with farmers and academics while learning about agricultural production in the most populous nation in the world. In several of our on-farm visits were surprised when farmers showed us fish ponds that they had created in the corners of their fields. What we saw were the rudimentary beginnings of an aquaculture project. Imagine our surprise when we opened the frozen seafood case at a local store and saw that the catfish was farm-raised in China.

What seemed like a novel idea in 2008 has grown into an industry that ships frozen catfish halfway around the world. But, in some ways, the idea may not be all that novel when we look at the bigger picture.

When the number of human beings was very low, the impact of gathering nuts, grains, berries, and catching an occasional animal had very little impact on the environment. But as the number of humans in any given area began to grow so did their impact on the environment and the foods that they ate.

Eventually megafauna disappeared, some as a result of human hunting. As humans transitioned from hunter gatherers to settled agriculturalists they domesticated both plants and animals.

Though early settlers in the US engaged in crop and animal agriculture, they also continued to supplement their diet with wild game. As the population grew, states began to put limits on the hunting of some animals and hunting prohibitions on others.

At the beginning of the age of European exploration of the world, the ocean seemed like an endless source of fish. But as fishing fleets became larger and more efficient, some fish populations were threatened with extinction.

As a result, the US has put limits on the catch of some ocean animals. For instance “commercial and recreational fishing for Atlantic salmon in the United States is prohibited. In addition, the Gulf of Maine distinct population segment (DPS) of Atlantic salmon are protected under the Endangered Species Act” (https://tinyurl.com/ar9x7463).

The result of the loss of ocean catch has been the development of techniques to “farm raise” Atlantic salmon in net cages in the ocean. Most of the Atlantic salmon consumed in the US now comes from areas of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Chile.

At the same time the catch of freshwater fish has not been sufficient to meet domestic demand. As a result, we have seen the development of a “farm raised” catfish industry in the US. At the same time the US brings in farm raised fish from other countries including the frozen catfish we saw in the freezer case.

Does the increasing demand for fish among US consumers, represent an opportunity for some in the US farming sector? Could we domestically raise more of the catfish, tilapia, and steelhead trout that US consumers are purchasing? Given the reality that much of the farm raised fresh fish is airfreighted into the US (with an increased carbon footprint), it seems to us that there could be some advantages to be gained by domestic production.

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