

# Fish Farming

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## Tilapia 'miracle fish'

BY GLENN WANNAMAHER

Ontario fisheries consultant Thomas George likes to describe tilapia as the "miracle fish" - but not just because of its attention grabbing Biblical connection as the fish Jesus shared with the masses.

George says tilapia, a hardy, tasty, fast-growing finfish that is popular in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, is ideally suited as an alternative species for farming in Canada.

He says the fish has such an impressive range of characteristics, including a tough resistance to disease and prospects for successful, large-scale production here are high.

Better still, he says, consumers around the world like to eat it. World-wide production jumped by 150 per cent between 1984-92, and this year an Ontario operation, Northern Tilapia, became the first farm in Canada to produce the fish commercially.

Known under more colourful names such as Cherry Snapper, Golden Perch, Aquatic Chicken, and Saint Peter's Chicken, tilapia is now being farmed in more than 75 countries and accounts for about six per cent of world finfish production.

"It is," he told producers recently at the annual meeting of the Aquaculture Association of Canada, "a fish of the past, the present, and the future."

George, who has worked on aquaculture projects around the world with such organizations as the Canadian International Development Agency and the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization, said the renewed global interest in tilapia is based on a number of factors.

"It's easy to cultivate, it's fast-growing, resistant to disease, and will tolerate widely different conditions," he said.

Specifically, it can adapt to temperatures ranging from 8 to 42 degrees C., and to fresh, brackish and salt water within certain limits, and depending upon the species.

It can tolerate captivity and can be reared under various husbandry conditions, demonstrating good productivity per unit volume of water.

As well, he said, the fish shows economic, efficient food conversion and grows rapidly on low protein diets.

And importantly, he said, the fish tastes good, noting "the flesh is rated high in flavour with a firm texture."

Ontario Aquaculture Association Executive Director Julian Hynes, who's also sold on

tilapia's potential, says it has a sweet taste, not unlike sole.

Both George and Hynes, however, suggest there is not much time to lose if Canadian

producers want to grab a piece of the market.

US production has soared 300 per cent in the past five years, and demand is growing faster than for any other farmed species, he said, including rainbow trout.

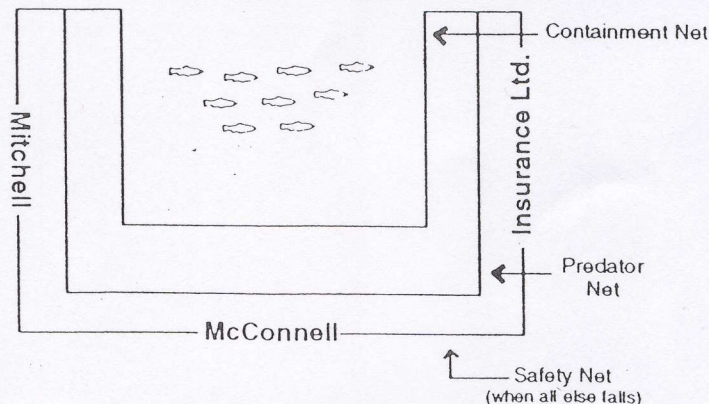
One reason for this boost in popularity in North America is the growing Asian population, which is particularly evident in Toronto.

Until now, the Toronto market has been served either by US producers (for live fish) or Taiwan, Thailand, and Trinidad and Tobago (for frozen fish). The Toronto market alone consumed an estimated 40,000 kilograms (both fresh and frozen) of tilapia in 1995.

But with the start-up of Northern Tilapia's operation, George hopes it's a sign that Canadian producers can begin to tap into a market that's growing not only at home but around the world



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