Top of the South
What's happening with tourism and seafood

Ulrike Sassenberg, Laura Jodice, and John Hull bring us up to speed with the value that locally caught seafood can add to local tourism.

Eating seafood is a popular activity for visitors to coastal destinations in New Zealand. However, strategic promotion of locally caught seafood through value-added tourism products and opportunities is relatively new for the Nelson/Marlborough region, a destination that is becoming increasingly recognized as a leader in wine and food tourism.

The New Zealand Tourism Research Institute and the Clemson International Institute for Tourism Research & Development recently collaborated with the Marine Farming Association (MFA) to evaluate the linkages between seafood and tourism created by the "Top of the South Aquaculture and Seafood Trail" organized by the MFA in 2005.

Top idea

The MFA, lead by Executive Director Graeme Coates, developed and published the Top of the South Aquaculture and Seafood Trail brochure as a guide for tourists in 2005. In doing so, they joined a growing global trend among fishing communities challenged by regulatory and environmental changes, globalization of trade, and public attitudes. These seaside destinations are developing strategies to integrate fisheries and tourism industries as a means to diversify their economy while retaining community character and educating the public about seafood harvest. This trend is also a popular approach for entrepreneurs wanting to attract the rising number of culinary tourists seeking unique food and drink experiences.

Aquaculture-related ecotourism, which is being promoted by a number of countries (FAO Fisheries and Aquaculture Department, 2007), provides a unique opportunity for tourists interested in observing and learning about seafood production and harvest. This idea of creating a seafood destination is relatively recent. For example, about 15 years ago, Astoria, in the US state of Oregon, the commercial fishing community, once famous for its canneries, embarked on a multi-year strategic revitalisation focusing on its seafood heritage. The resulting waterfront experience linked by the Riverwalk, integrates processing plants, commercial docks, seafood restaurants, a seafood cooking school, and a maritime museum. It is now a popular destination where visitors can learn about and directly enjoy the seafood harvest. In Aotearoa, New Zealand, the long-standing history of seafood harvest is showcased through numerous seafood trails (e.g., "Foodie Trail" in Dunedin).

In New Zealand, more recently, a few commercial fisheries in have begun direct sales of their catch at the docks in Picton and Wellington, which is appealing to tourists and residents interested in fresh local seafood.

Since most New Zealand seafood is exported, the idea of promoting locally caught seafood through "value-added" tourism is relatively unique. Developing these products can mean economic benefits for seafood companies, including enhanced marketing. For example, international tourists visiting New Zealand are eating some of the same products they can get from their grocer at home. Social benefits are also accrued by having a public that is more educated about, and accepting of, marine farms as part of the tourist experience. These benefits are important given that the simultaneous exponential growth of aquaculture and tourism in New Zealand over the last 30 years has intensified conflict in coastal communities. According to Coates, the MFA (representing over 160 marine farmers...
in the top of the South Island) believed the Trail would be a good approach to improving community attitudes about marine farm presence and expansion in the Queen Charlotte and Pelorus Sounds and Golden Bay.

The Trail follows a 350km route from Kaikoura to Takaka and highlights the region as a seafood destination. The route links 21 businesses, primarily in Blenheim, Picton, Havelock and Nelson, that are associated with the seafood or aquaculture industry. These include restaurants, accommodation, local tour providers, harvesting and processing businesses (mussel farms), and fresh seafood suppliers. Coates attracted members by taking his own "tour" of the region and personally visiting potential participants. The cost of the brochure was supported by trail members ($250 or less per business) and the MFA, and 5000 copies were published and distributed to trail member sites.

A little background

Last year, the New Zealand Tourism Research Institute (NZTRI) at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) identified the Trail as a unique tourism innovation by the seafood industry. They invited Coates to give a presentation at the Seafood and Tourism Workshop during the 5th International Coastal and Marine Tourism Congress in October, 2007. At that time, the MFA demonstrated a need to evaluate the Trail's success and develop a strategic plan for marketing and product development. Researchers from NZTRI and Clemson University's International Institute for Tourism Research and Development in the USA, collaborating on a broader seafood and tourism research initiative, submitted a proposal for funding from AUT. The resulting research project, coordinated by NZTRI, began in June, 2008. The study was designed to identify the potential for continued and expanded partnership between the tourism and seafood sectors. Another goal was to identify recommendations for improving and maximizing the value and sustainability of the Trail.

When the researchers visited the Nelson/Marlborough region in late June, 2008, they met with various businesses, agencies and organizations relevant to the Trail. They interviewed 22 local stakeholders (including representatives from District Councils, local tourism promotion organizations, Ministry of Fisheries, Aquaculture NZ, Ministry of Tourism and Tourism NZ) and 24 local businesses (seafood processing and marketing companies, seafood retailers, restaurants, seafood events, etc.).
tour providers, restaurants, and accommodation highlighting local seafood). Respondents participated in a one hour interview regarding strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities associated with the Trail, common characteristics of local coastal tourism, and innovative and collaborative strategies for planning and development. The majority of interviewees (87%) also answered a paper survey designed to evaluate attitudes and perspectives about tourism and seafood in the region. These methods were used to characterize community capacity to link tourism and aquaculture opportunities in the Nelson/ Marlborough Region. Questions addressing the economic, social, and environmental outcomes from the Trail also assessed the sustainability of current practices and provided input to the strategic tourism planning process.

This article reports some initial observations about seafood and tourism issues in the region based on a review of secondary research and survey results. A future article will provide a more detailed analysis of interview results regarding strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats.

The research

Tourism continues to be important for New Zealand. For the year ending September, 2008, New Zealand had 2.5 million international visitor arrivals with expenditures (in the year ending June, 2008) of $6,177 million. International visitor arrivals are forecast to increase by 3.3% annually to 2014 (Ministry of Tourism, September, 2008). Domestic tourism in the year ending June, 2008, included 25.8 million day-trips and 14.4 million overnight trips, resulting in $7.3 million in expenditures. The Nelson/Marlborough area is an attractive tourist destination for both international and domestic tourists. The area is rich in historical attractions and also has strong potential as a seafood destination. The Treasure Pathway, a cultural route in the region, links heritage sites along 680km of roads between Picton and Farewell Spit (www.treasuredpathway.co.nz).

International and domestic tourism peaks in the region around summertime, but also during the wine (February) and mussel (March) festivals. However, the majority of ferry travellers arriving in Picton, one of the major ports on the Aquaculture and Seafood Trail, are tourists passing through on their way to Nelson and other South Island destinations.

In addition to agriculture, the Nelson/Marlborough area as a whole has a strong economic dependence on both aquaculture and tourism, which generates a combined $402 million annually in the Nelson region alone. The area is promoted internationally as the most famous wine region of New Zealand. Although approximately 80% of New Zealand's marine products are grown in the Trail region and multiple processors and seafood companies are important to the regional economy, the marine farms and commercial fishing ports are not commonly used to promote the area as a tourist destination. In addition, it is somewhat difficult to purchase fresh local seafood other than in restaurants, even though this is New Zealand's most important salmon and mussel farming area.

The evaluation study provides more insight into seafood and tourism linkages in the region. Overall, the survey results demonstrate that although a tourism and seafood business in the top of New Zealand's South Island is well developed, there are weaknesses in networking and collaboration between these sectors. There are also gaps between perceptions of the aquaculture and tourism industries; in particular, there are differing perceptions about whether marine farms are disturbing to residents and tourism or not.

Survey response was from people familiar with the community. A majority of survey respondents had lived an average of 16 years in the community, with 61.1% of stakeholder and 52.4% of business representatives being long-term residents (over 10 years). Also, survey respondents who were stakeholders had an average age of 51 years (ranging from 35 to 64 years) and the majority had a university degree. Business respondents had an average age of 48 years (ranging
from 30 to 63 years) and the majority had tertiary level education. The majority (81%) of business respondents also operated small- to medium-sized enterprises, making less than $5 million.

Responses confirm that tourism is important to the region; however respondents perceived weaknesses in collaboration, networking and marketing. Eighty-eight percent of the stakeholders and 55% of the businesses strongly agreed/agreed that “tourism is well-developed in my region/community”, and all strongly agreed/agreed that “tourism is important to my region and community”. However, more than half of the respondents felt that there is a need for better coordination in the tourism industry and better networking with other economic sectors to promote tourism in the region. In addition, only one-third of respondents strongly agreed/agreed that “the marketing efforts for our region are well-coordinated”.

Initial discussions with both stakeholders and business demonstrated their positive support for the continuation of a seafood trail in the region. However, these respondents still perceive a gap in resident support regarding the seafood and tourism industries. For example, only 10.6% of stakeholders and 19% of businesses believe residents are supportive of the commercial fishing industry, and 10.5% of stakeholders and 35% of businesses believe residents are supportive of the aquaculture industry. However, 79% of stakeholders and 67% of businesses believe residents are supportive of the tourism industry. Even so, the majority of respondents (80%) believe seafood is an important local product for visitors to the region.

To the future

Resolving these contradictory gaps may require technical assistance or other forms of support. However, less than one-third of respondents believe their region has received adequate technical and financial support on tourism and industry trends in the past. This is relevant because companies and communities may be reluctant to invest significant money and time in development of seafood and tourism linkages without information on economic and social benefits and advice on best practices.

While the analysis shows potential for the MTA’s Aquaculture and Seafood Trail to serve as an innovative driver for regional networking, capacity for linkage of aquaculture, commercial fishing and tourism (partnership, investment, marketing, attitudes) has to be developed further. In particular, evaluation of demand by domestic and international tourists for seafood opportunities would facilitate strategic marketing and planning. Collaboration between NZTRI and regional seafood and tourism representatives, focused on the South’s Aquaculture and Seafood Trail, will continue as a means to inform and facilitate networking and community capacity-building.

Although the goals are to strengthen and foster sustainable linkages between seafood and tourism interests in the region, researchers also hope to supply the broader population of seafood and tourism businesses in other coastal regions about best practices for success.