

Aquaculture Rescues Our Abalone (Cape Business News)

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ABALONE (perhaps better known as perlemoen), a seafood delicacy unique to the Western Cape coastline, is steadily and aggressively being wiped out by poachers, as is regularly reported.

Easy and lucrative money has turned poaching into a full-scale industry, now removing an estimated 1 000 tons a year from our shorelines. At this rate there will soon be no more of this once abundant shellfish.

Fortunately there were men of vision in the early 1990's when the abalone-poaching problem was in its infancy. It was clear that government could not do enough to protect the resource, and the only possible solution was aquaculture.

In 1993 the wild fishery was removing 600 tons, the sport diver an estimated further 150 – 200 tons and poachers an estimate of 200 tons. The resource was only just keeping up with the harvesters. Today, despite a total ban on sports divers and limited commercial harvest, it is in severe danger of being completely depleted, with poachers making off with the whole haul.

The most prominent player in this field of aquaculture is Hermanus-based Abagold. Established in the early 1990s with minimal seed capital, it has now grown into a position where it is the leading producer of abalone, exporting some 220 tons of abalone yearly, representing a monetary value of R55 million.

The good news is that Abagold – which last month received a capital injection of close to R53 million – will grow its production to an estimated 475 tons annually over a period of five years.

According to Abagold MD Christo du Plessis this will put the company in a commanding position as a leading player in the hatching, rearing, processing and exporting of local abalone, bearing in mind that the total of abalone farming by all players combined now runs at around 1 000 tons per year.

Abagold's three existing farms are located close the Hermanus harbour and the additional investment will enable the company to build a fourth, adjacent, 7 ha farm, the size of the three existing farms combined.

Farming abalone is an intensive labour effort too. Abagold currently employs some 270 people, but this figure will have grown to around 470 over the five year period of expansion, according to du Plessis.

Unfortunately for locals, most of the production will be exported to the Far East, where abalone fetches between R200 and R300 per kilogram in current values, depending on size and quality.

Abagold's existing hatchery provides a solid foundation for the cultivation of its abalone and consists of four distinct nodes. A recently completed five year genetic project will soon see the first animals from selected families being placed on the farm. In the larval rearing area, fertilised eggs are hatched and nursed for the first week before they are transferred to the hatchery, where settled animals spend the first few months feeding on diatoms. Animals are weaned onto macro-algae in the nursery and grown to spat size.

The hatchery produces excess spat every month – this way only the best animals are picked out to ensure the superior final product. Grow-out tanks are situated on three aptly named farms in Hermanus: Sea View, Amaza (waves) and Bergsig (mountain view). Prime selected animals from the hatchery are placed on Sea View where expert staff provide them with the best possible care. Once the animals are of a suitable age and size, they are moved out to Amaza where the intermediate sized animals are housed. Finally, the animals are settled on Bergsig to complete their growth phase.

Combined, the three farms house 2 000 land-based tanks that require more than 7 000 tons of pumped seawater every hour.

In August 2006 Abagold commissioned its own state-of-the-art canning and processing facility. Since then it has established itself as a quality benchmark for canned and dried abalone from South Africa. The facility is managed with the help of a comprehensive Quality Management System, which includes HACCP compliance.

The latest investment, which will assist in making the expansion plans possible, was mobilised by private equity firm Inspired Evolution's One Fund and the IDC, according to du Plessis. The money was invested via BEE shareholders, which brings the empowerment shareholding component in Abagold to 25%.