

In Peru, a move to get farmers to trade in fish rather than coca

A new program aims to help coca growers raise paiche, a huge, endangered fish known for its flaky meat.

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PUCALLPA, PERU – Teofilo Tapullima knows first hand the dangers that lurk beneath the muddy waters of Peru's Amazon jungle: Piranhas, fresh-water rays, and the giant paiche fish, to name a few.

He recently found out just how tricky a paiche can be when he had to net one at the research institute where he works outside Pucallpa, in northern Peru.

"It came flying at me and slammed into my forehead. It gave me a headache, but luckily it was a small fish. If it had been a big one, I probably would have been blinded," he says.

A throwback to prehistoric times, with armored scales and a flat head, the paiches must come to the surface to breathe, making them easy targets for harpoon fishermen. But overfishing to meet demand for their delicious, flaky, boneless meat is wiping out paiche populations, and is now spurring efforts to save the fish, including a fish-farm venture that aims to provide local coca leaf growers with an alternative livelihood that does not fuel the illicit drug trade.

"This fish will be history in 10 to 15 years, unless something is done," says Fausto Hinostraza, who runs the Research Institute of the Peruvian Amazon, where Mr. Tapullima works.

Mr. Hinostraza's center has partnered with the Ucayali state government to work on a fish-farming plan that would repopulate lakes with paiches, while creating opportunities to sell the fish for its meat.

How the program works

Together they have set up floating cages in a lake upriver from Pucallpa, to house baby paiches. The program has a few thousand fish in each cage, with the goal of reaching a constant population of 8,000 paiches per cage. This may not seem like much, but with each fish reaching up to 25 pounds in a year, authorities believe that they will harvest enough paiche meat annually to satisfy local demand and begin exporting.

Edwin Vasquez, who left office as governor of Ucayali on Jan. 2, says marketing studies done by government agencies show that paiche steaks can sell for around \$20 a pound in European and US gourmet markets. "This is an economic opportunity for communities that have few options," he says.

Mr. Vasquez believes that if the Imiria project is successful, similar efforts will pop up in the region. The US Agency for International Development (USAID), through one of its partner organizations, has contributed one-fifth of the \$250,000 cost of the program as part of its anti-drug work in Peru.

The state of Ucayali is part of a jungle belt where coca, from which cocaine is processed, is grown.

The cost of the fish-farming project is only a small drop in USAID's \$48.5 million alternative development budget to fight illicit crops in Peru in 2006. As a result of a multi-pronged strategy

promoted by USAID - which includes helping to provide alternative crops, building infrastructure, and helping growers produce products rather than merely sell raw materials - coca crops in Aguaytia, the principal coca-growing zone in Ucayali, have fallen from 15,000 to around 2,225 acres out of 119,000 acres nationwide.

Peru - the world's second-largest coca-growing country after Colombia - produced approximately 180 tons of cocaine in 2005, according to UN statistics. The National Police seized and destroyed 16.7 tons of cocaine and cocaine paste in the first three quarters of 2006.

Ruth Ruiz, the assistant economic manager for Ucayali's state government, says that fish farming with paiche is a perfect alternative to growing coca because of the price.

Paiche can bring in about \$2.30 per pound on the local market, while coca leaves are currently fetching about \$1 per pound.

"This project has met the objective of showing that paiche can be raised in cages and that they reach a size big enough in one year to cover costs and turn a profit," says Ms. Ruiz.

Obstacles to success

There are, however, major stumbling blocks to getting paiche on dinner tables around the world. Hinostroza's institute is still working on better ways to get the fish to reproduce. The center has many breeders, but reproduction is sporadic. Last year, a serious drought in the Amazon affected reproduction, causing a huge drop in the production of fingerlings.

"Paiches appear to be seriously affected by climate change. We are continuing to learn about the fish each day," says Hinostroza.

Researchers are also working on finding the right formula for fish meal to feed the voracious paiches. Besides munching on other fish, Hinostroza says, paiches in the wild have been seen jumping out of water to snatch small birds from overhanging tree branches.

A corn-based feed seems to be working to sustain the caged fish right now, but it is made by hand at the institute. Mass production would be needed if there is any hope of reaching Vasquez's goal of exporting 50,000 pounds of paiche meat monthly.



There are also logistical problems getting the fish out of the jungle. The fish must be moved eight hours by boat to Pucallpa and then trucked to Lima, 300 miles to the south.

Another totally different operation contemplated by the state government would be to freeze the fish onsite and send them to Lima in refrigerated trucks. They would then be shipped to Europe and the US.

Even if they settled on an efficient way to get the fish from the jungle to US and European dinner plates, environmental groups may not be too keen on upscale restaurants including an endangered fish on their menu. This potential problem would be offset by the paiche fish-farming plan, according to an early 2006 report by a UN agency. According to the BioTrade Facilitation Programme, farmed paiche offer a window of opportunity as US and European customers increase their demand for products that are ecofriendly.

Vasquez is confident that these problems will be dealt with once his paiche plan begins working at full steam over the course of the next 18 to 24 months.

He said the plan will not only repopulate paiche in Peru, but he foresees shipping fingerlings across the border to Brazil to help boost the population there, ending its endangered status.

Zeb Hogan, a US biologist studying the world's biggest freshwater fish, agreed with Vasquez's assessment that conservation projects could work. "If these projects are successful, the paiche can be harvested sustainably and the population will be protected from extinction," he said in an e-mail.