SOME OPINIONS ABOUT DEVELOPING AQUACULTURE IN SÓC TRĂNG

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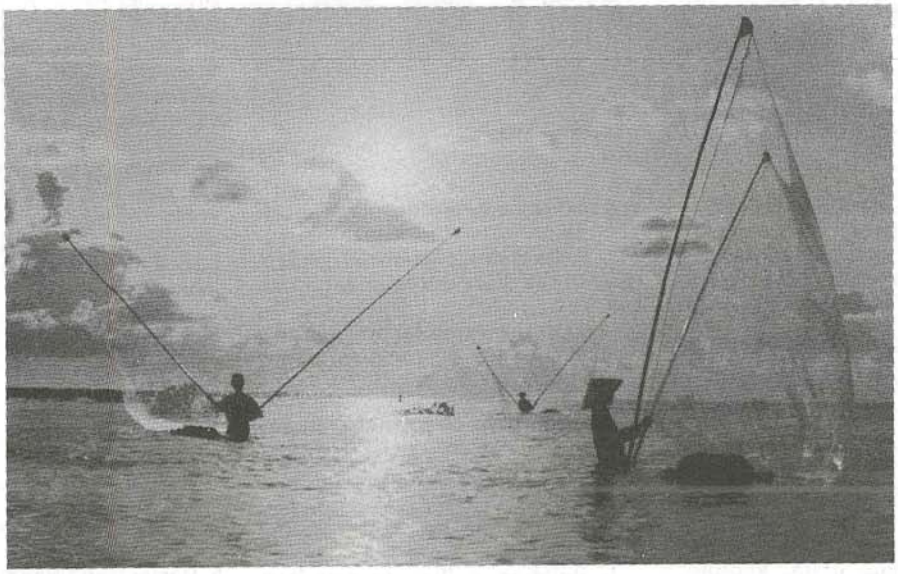
In Sóc Trăng, the aquaculture is considered as one of the most important industries, second only to crop farming, and essential for the socioeconomic development strategy of the province. It plays a major role in accelerating the development of other industries, earning foreign exchange, creating new jobs, redistributing labor, changing the structure of industry and helping with the protection of territorial waters. That is why a development strategy based on the aquaculture becomes the best way for Sóc Trăng to modernize and industrialize its economy and bridge the gap between itself and other provinces.



In recent years, certain national programs have been carried out in Sóc Trăng to enhance capacity to exploit the territorial waters and apply technical advances to sea farming business with the result that the supply of raw materials to local factories processing aquatic products for export was improved. However, effects caused by many factors make the aquatic output fluctuate widely affecting unfavorably the development of the aquaculture and living standards of fishermen.

I. POTENTIAL AND SITUATION

1. Potential for aquaculture in Sóc Trăng

Sóc Trăng province has a coastline of 72 km long, territorial waters of 171,400 hectares, two estuaries of Định An and Trần Đề Rivers and big reserves of aquatic products. In addition, coastal marshes provide good environment to raise various sea animals and plants.

a. Marine resources: In Sóc Trăng waters, there are some 35 species of shrimp of high value, including tiger shrimp, blue legged prawn, green tiger prawn and banana prawn. Fish resources are estimated at 450,000 tonnes (from 1.4 to 1.5 tonnes per sq.km), including 157,000 tonnes of surface fish and 293,000 tonnes of bottom fish. The rational exploitation is about 275,000 tonnes a year. The fishing ground near the Hậu estuary allows exploitation of 4,200 tonnes of fish a year and the ground near Paulo Condor allows 8,580 tonnes a year.

b. Brackish water resources: The area suitable to sea farming is 35,000 hectares (10,000 hectares of brackish water and 25,000 hectares of seawater). The output is estimated at 11,000 tonnes a year.

c. Inland water resources: System of estuaries is the source of food for many species of fish and shellfish. Coastal marshes and tidal forests provide them with accommodation. The resources are estimated at 3,000 tonnes, including 2,000 tonnes of shrimp. The rational exploitation is about 1,200 tonnes, including 100 tonnes of shrimp.

2. Development of aquaculture and fishery in recent years

In recent years when shrimp and prawn from Vietnam are saleable in both domestic and foreign markets, fisheries and aquaculture have developed in leaps and bounds. The area for sea farming increased year after year and many new techniques have been applied (from extensive farming to semi-intensive and intensive

farming). The aquacultural output in 1999 reached 9,556 tonnes.

As for fishery, many programs have been launched (modernizing the fleet of fishing boats, promoting deep-sea fishery, etc.) with the result that the fishery output rose quickly and reached some 18,000 tonnes in 1999 (15% of which was shrimp).

These developments helped increase the supply of raw materials to seafood processing factories, create more jobs and improve personal income. Many farmers in Mỹ Xuyên, Long Phú and Vĩnh Châu districts have become rich by raising prawn and shrimp.

However, the supply of aquatic products isn't reliable because bad crops alternate with good ones. The sea farming business, especially the raising of tiger prawn, is good during dry season, thus the supply reduces in rainy season. The fishery doesn't run well during rainy season and thus fails to reduce the shortage. And as a result, processing factories can't handle all materials supplied when the output is high and they have to cover warehouse charges. In rainy season, they have to reduce the labor force and fail to fill orders placed by foreign buyers.

This situation results from many causes. Although Sóc Trăng has a long coastline and great fish resources, exploitation was done according to traditional methods. Fishermen couldn't apply new techniques because of the lack of fund for investment with the result that the output wasn't stable and coastal resources were reduced drastically. In areas for sea farming in some districts, changes in salinity of water over seasons make it difficult to increase the output. Tapping these resources requires big investments in infrastructure (especially a separate system of irrigation needed for controlling spread of disease) and new equipment, and coordination of different agencies of the local government.

The development of sea farming business in recent years has been unruly and a new development plan is needed. Farmers fail to apply new techniques and usually suffer losses caused by poor productivity and shrimp diseases. The local government has no facilities for predicting and preventing the spread of disease.

Farmers usually buy young fish and shrimp from other provinces because local fish farms couldn't supply enough young. The imported species are sometimes of poor quality or infected with diseases.

II. SOME MEASURES TO INCREASE FISHERY OUTPUT

The world demand for sea products is expected to rise in the coming years, the domestic demand also increases when personal income and flows of foreign tourists to Vietnam become bigger. At present, there are three processing factories and another one is under construction in Sóc Trăng. The total processing capacity of these factories is estimated at 30,400 tonnes of tiger prawn a year. To meet their demand for raw materials, the existing fishery output should be doubled to reach at least 26,000 tonnes a year, and these factories buy the difference from neighboring provinces.

It's easier to increase the output by developing the sea farming business because the existing fleet of fishing boats could hardly catch more fish in short period. Developing the sea farming, however, could cause damage for the ecosystem and other balances. The following are our suggestions about this problem.

- Making a master plan for sustainable and optimal exploitation of fishery resources and protection of the environment appropriate to the development of other industries.
- Making plans for intensive investments in suitable sea farming models (prawn and rice, shrimp and forestation, fish and rice, etc.) and dissemination of new farming methods (improved extensive farming, semi-intensive farming and intensive farming) aiming at producing products of high value, such as tiger prawn, green tiger prawn, crab and eleotrid: Districts appropriate for sea farming are Mỹ Xuyên, Vĩnh Châu and Long Phú. In addition, more investment should be put in production of freshwater fish for local consumption.
- The sea farming could be developed at different scales according to available fund: families, private fish farms, new-style cooperatives and state fish farms.
- Fishery authorities should ensure the supply of young fish, feed, fish quarantine and prediction, and the introduction of new technical advances to sea farming.
- Fishery processing factories had better cooperate with fishery authorities to train farmers in new techniques, develop their own fish farms and use their development fund to provide farmers with credit.
- State banks should increase the size of loan per unit of area used for sea farming.
- Local government should develop the irrigation system in areas specializing in sea farming and set up a contingency fund in cases of natural disasters or spread of diseases.■