

Ferdinand Cruz Talks About the Enormous Global Market for Ornamental Fishes

A top marketing expert for [ornamental fishes](#) explains how the international export protocols work.

Ferdinand P. Cruz, consultant of the East Asia Seas and Terrestrial Initiative, understands the world ornamental fishes market like the back of his hand. He could casually enumerate fish species, rattle off figures, explain the science behind a fish farming practice and share interesting anecdotes about the international tropical fish market very much like the men who have been in the business for a long time. And he certainly has. A former coordinator of the International Marine Alliance Indonesia Project, this Ateneoeducated fish expert was one of the first live fish exporters in the Philippines to promote net capture of aquarium fish as an alternative to cyanide.

Today, most of Cruz's time is spent in teaching the members of the Tanauan Ornamental Pisces Growers Multipurpose Cooperative and its partner and consolidator, Yoreca Farms, Inc., to grow tropical ornamental fishes that would pass the very stringent US and European markets. As a consultant working for the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), he has created the model set-up for a team that could open the doors for the vast and immense global ornamental fishes market. More than transferring technical knowledge, however, the amiable Cruz says he is also firming up the whole team to do business the professional way.

We met Mr. Cruz in our recent trip to Wawa, Tanauan, Batangas to see for ourselves how this outstanding cooperative operates. And from what we have observed, this government and private sector partnership might just be our gateway to a whole new world of ornamental fish exploration.

Excerpts:

How did you get involved in this project?

I worked in Indonesia. We have a sustainable livelihood component in villages where we do programs against illegal fishermen and those that are environmentally destructive. We were able to create a system where communities are able to market their products and niche their products as one of the best. So when I came back here last year, BFAR invited me to look into aquaculture. BFAR accommodated my going around and then we came up with a concept of why don't we professionalize everything the way we have done it before in other countries? I told them why don't we do it in the system where we group people together so that they would learn from us? We tried to simplify science into layman's term. So we did that and I had groups in the US plus the scientists who gave us all the advice. First, I said we need a consolidator who would export because the cooperative members cannot do this alone. Combining that would be the best system.

And that consolidator was Yoreca Farms...

Exactly. We asked the people of Yoreca Farms: Would they be socially responsible? Would they share their equity? Those were the criteria that we were really looking for. When they said they were willing to do that, I said you will have to professionalize yourselves. We said we will teach

you how to do that, give you standard operating procedures and protocols and I said, you need the cooperative to back you up so we can strengthen the cooperative through the help of the LGU, BFAR and their extension agents. So we basically approach the international market through a system of passing through the scientists: is this species acceptable? Is this shape acceptable? Is this color acceptable? Is this parasite free? Bacteria free? That's what we did, and it was really successful. And we have very little mortality. Almost nil.

What exactly are these ornamental fishes?

We have platties, the guppies, mollies, angels, swordtails, etc. Fresh water has thousands of species.

How were you able to market these fishes abroad?

We introduced them through my contacts in the US and when I knew that they found the fishes okay, I invited several buyers from Germany and Switzerland. So they came down here. And the first thing that they did was to inspect our farm. Are our facilities passable for the export market? What are their knowledge and skills? I was not around when they came here but they passed with flying colors! The buyers were saying this is the first time they have seen a farm that was set up so clean, so organized and have certain practices already. After that, they visited the Yoreca farm and they knew and said that this is the way it should be done. There are certain protocols and processes for backyard raising of ornamental fishes. But in order to pass the needs of the European market, all of these have to pass through a certain quarantine system which has to be recognized and inspected by BFAR. That's the way it's done. You get-a FAO certificate, etc.

How huge is the international market for ornamental fishes?

If you picture hobbies, the number one hobby in the whole world is photography. The second hobby is raising ornamental fishes. That's how big it is. It's billions of dollars. But you have to know how to be competitive in the market just like photography, cameras have to be competitive same with ornamental fishes.

And how stringent is the international market?

In freshwater fishes, you have the viruses that have to be removed. There are a lot of bacteria, viruses and parasites that you have to be sure is not present in Your species. This is why we have a quarantine. There must be a government agency on top of that certifying that it's free. BFAR is taking care of it. They walked the whole thing up to the export site. So before they exported anything, the fishes have to be disease free. Now it's how to make this official and create a fishery administrative order that will make it credible in the international market that is needed. We're all working on it.

How much do these fishes sell abroad?

It depends. One piece would cost 20 cents, 30 cents, 40 cents, 50 cents and they order by the thousands. You're talking here about three-month-old fishes. The buyer pays for the packing of the fish, plastic bags and everything. So if you look at it, you can buy by the tens of thousands if you have the volume and if you have the species.

What are our advantages as a country?

Our fishes have fantastic colors. I think we have the green thumb for it. That's one thing we have

noticed. The foreign scientists said, the fishes' color, body shape and the fins are just perfect. In terms of fish color, we can beat countries like Singapore. Although they have different breeds of discus which are beautiful, we think we can do better. And we have all the water also. Singapore has to bring in their water from Malaysia.

In a nutshell, what do you think we must do to make it big abroad?

You have to professionalize the industry and you have to have government support. Just like what Singapore is doing, and Malaysia is following. It's the government, LGU and basically the community which you have to organize and make into a cohesive group to function as one, think as one. It does not take so much to do that. It just takes a little more push.

By Ronald G. Mangubat