NAMIBIANS GEARED FOR GROWTH

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NAMIBIA'S oyster farming industry is looking to new markets in the Far East and gearing up for substantial growth, but there are a few obstacles to overcome first, reports **CLAIRE ATTWOOD**.

Oyster farming is the most established aquaculture activity in Namibia, with six farms operating at Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and Lüderitz, growing both Pacific (*Crassostrea gigas*) and European oysters (*Ostrea edulis*). Estimated production of the Namibian industry in 2004 was six million oysters, worth some N$12 million (US$1.7m).

Some farmers are experimenting with alternative species such as scallops (*Argopecten purpuratus*) and one Walvis Bay operation is harvesting wild clams (*Venerupis corrugatus*) and fattening them for export.

A number of factors make Namibia ideal for oyster farms. First, the nutrient-rich waters of the Benguela Current encourage rapid growth – oysters grow to market size in eight or nine months, in contrast with typically 24 months in Europe.

Namibia also has clean water – no rivers empty into the sea along its desert coast, dramatically reducing the potential for land-based pollution.

Spurred on by clean, phytoplankton-rich water and strong demand from emerging markets, local oyster farmers are preparing for substantial growth.

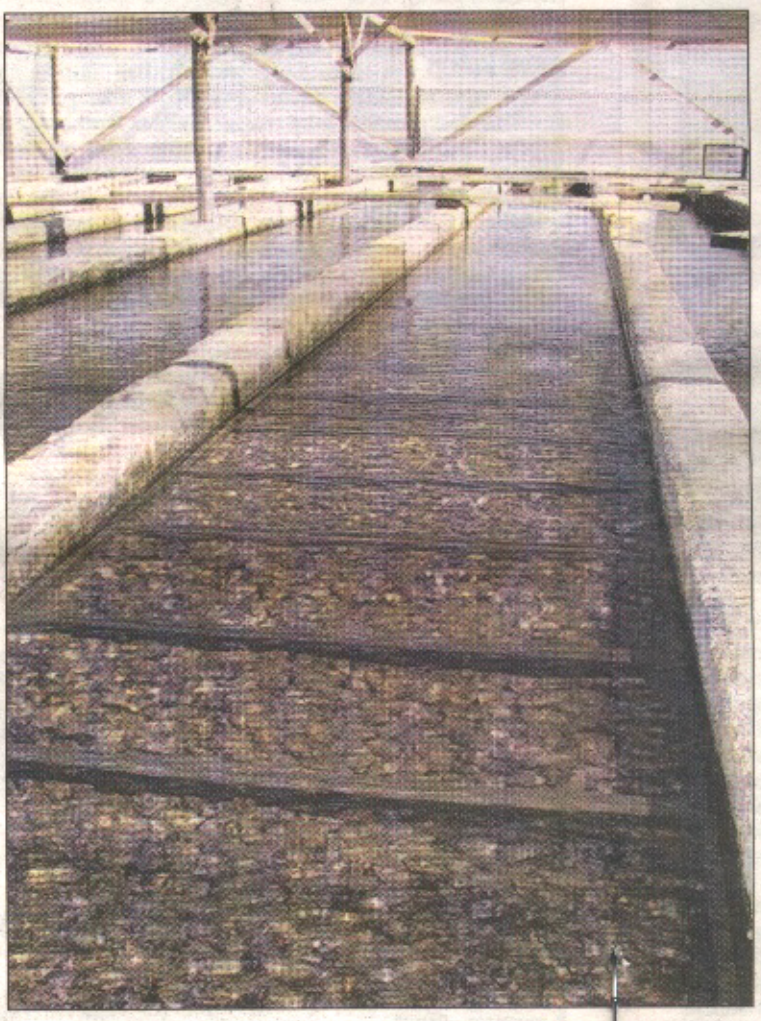
At Walvis bay, Aquapark – reserved by Namibia's port authority, Namport, for aquaculture activities – was recently expanded from 500 to 1250ha of sea area. Three farms are currently farming oysters at Aquapark. Two use the longline system, while a third uses the traditional 'Spanish' raft method.

Both longline farms are preparing to dramatically increase the number of lines available for oyster culture.

James West of Namibia Aquaculture (Namaqua), and chairman of the Namibian Mariculture Association, is planning to increase production to one million a month.

"We have a well established system, so expanding our production will simply mean doing more of the same," he explains

Henning du Plessis of Joe's Oysters is establishing 300 longlines in the Aquapark, also aiming one million oysters a month.



Gregory Swartz, who produces oysters at the extensive Walvis Bay Salt Refiners facility, is also gearing up for larger quantities. "We produce a million oysters per year and we're looking at expanding and producing a million-and-a-half," he says.

The industry's collective plans to expand are being driven by strong demand from markets in the Far East. Namaqua already sells oysters into Beijing, and James West is encouraged by avid demand from the Chinese market.

"In China you have a huge developing economy, a huge population and people moving into an income bracket where they can afford to eat oysters," explains West. "The market is there."

More than 70% of Namibia's oysters are exported to South Africa, where there is strong demand from the restaurant trade. If it is to expand into other markets, the industry needs to overcome a substantial hurdle – Namibia lacks industrial laboratories to carry out mandatory tests that certify its oysters are uncontaminated and safe for human consumption.

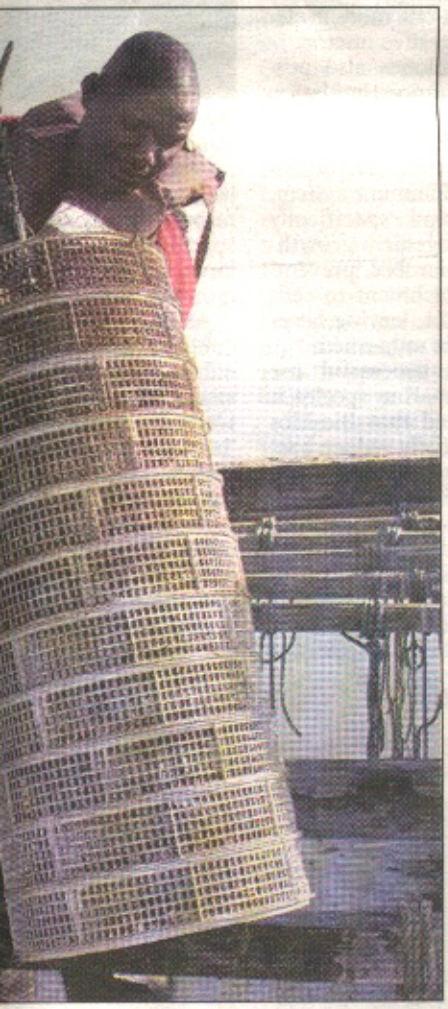
"We've been trying for five years to get a laboratory in place," says West. "We're still relying on Cape Town and it's not satisfactory. We need a one-day turnaround time."

Test results can take up to three weeks, and the lack of local labs inhibits Namibia's ability to meet the food safety requirements of potential trading partners, such as the EU.

"I definitely feel that this relatively small issue is preventing some massive development," says West.

Bronwen Currie, chief biologist at the National Marine Information and Research Centre (NatMIRC), is well aware of the farmers' frustrations, but she is encouraged that Namibia's Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Fisheries and Marine Resources have jointly earmarked fun build the required laborato

Microbiology and phyto laboratories dedicated to aquaculture are being set u NatMIRC, while biotoxin l also be jointly funded by th ministries. "This is a huge forward because the Minis Trade and Industry, as the



Workers at Richwater Oyster Production, near Swakopmund, prepare fresh oysters for market

Far left: Nutrient-rich water flows over oysters grown on wooden runways at Richwater Oyster Production. They reach market size in eight to nine months

Centre left: A worker raises the plastic baskets that are used to grow oysters on traditional Spanish rafts belonging to Beira Aquaculture in Walvis Bay

Left: Namibians believe their oysters are the best in the world!

competent authority, has realised how serious the situation is and has prioritised these laboratories," Currie says.

Currie has already been instrumental in setting up a basic shellfish sanitation programme in Namibia. With funding from the Benguela Current Large Marine Ecosystem (BCLME) programme, she and her colleagues at NatMIRC have instituted a shellfish screening programme.

Water quality in Walvis Bay's Aquapark is tested once every two weeks and similar tests are conducted in Lüderitz. Oysters are tested for bacterial contamination and heavy metals, but NatMIRC still lacks the equipment to carry out routine tests for biotoxins.

Currie concedes that constructing and equipping of the labs will take time. In the meantime, producers are investigating a number of 'stop-gap' measures which would allow them to meet international food safety requirements.

Ironically, after two years of monitoring, NatMIRC scientists have found no evidence of biotoxins in Namibian oysters. Even though the waters of Namibia are extremely rich in phytoplankton, regular tests have so far proved negative for biotoxins that could cause poisoning syndromes in consumers.

A species such as *Alexandrium catenella* could cause paralytic shellfish poisoning, while some species of *Dinophysis* and *Pseudo-nitzschia* can cause diarrhetic shellfish poisoning and amnesic shellfish poisoning, respectively.

"We don't think that biotoxins are a problem here, even though we've got the species," says Currie.

Her tests have verified that the water off Namibia is exceptionally well-suited to oyster cultivation. Regular water quality testing in the Aquapark, coupled with tests on oysters, have all proved negative for dangerous bacteria, heavy metals and phytoplankton toxins.

"This is very good news for the industry," says Currie.