

Beware of AquaShysters

By Dr. James Rakocy

There is a dark side to aquaculture. It should come as no surprise. Most fields of human endeavor have an ethically-challenged element that preys upon the unsuspecting for personal gain. But unfortunately it does come as a surprise when these people, who we call aquashysters, enter the aquaculture arena, which generally attracts idealistic people who want to produce food, enjoy a fulfilling lifestyle and work in sync with nature.

Shortly after graduating from Auburn University (AU) in 1980, I came into contact with my first aquashysters. In the first case, I was contacted by a man who wanted to build a large fish farm in St. Croix financed by some of the *wealthier families* on the island. I had no desire to help him in his quest for financing, but I did have a desire to check out his background. He told me that he ran successful fish farming operations in the Dominican Republic. He didn't know that I had just graduated from AU with the man who directed the D.R. government's Fisheries and Aquaculture Agency. So I made a quick call to my Dominican friend, and when I mentioned the entrepreneur's name, he became livid with anger and told me how he duped the government out of a lot of money and delivered nothing for it. As I started to receive phone calls from potential investors, I reported this fact. Then I received a very angry phone call from the aquashyster threatening me with a libel suit. That was the last I heard of him and the project.

Shortly after this incident, I was on an aquaculture fact finding mission to several Caribbean islands. A man in St. Lucia, who owned a very large estate, told me that he was recently approached by an international company that wanted to raise crawfish on his land. In addition to using his property they wanted him and a friend of his to invest in the project. Immediately a red flag went up because St.

Lucia does not have the lowland swampy conditions required by crawfish. I called another AU graduate, who is a professor at Louisiana State University, the center of crawfish research in the U.S., and asked him about this company. He never heard of it and couldn't find their name in an international directory. I quickly passed this information on to the estate owner, who immediately pulled out, but this friend was not fast enough and lost a substantial sum of money.

More examples of this nature followed throughout the years. I even testified before our local legislature to try to derail projects that had no chance of economic success. I did not want to see aquaculture get a black eye, especially in my backyard. During my encounters with dubious projects, I relied heavily on a wonderful network of state aquaculture extension agents who work for the land-grant universities. These highly trained and experienced aquaculturists are an excellent resource that anyone can call for well reasoned information. Often these extension agents contact me concerning aquaponic projects.

Misguided projects and financial loss can result from pure fraud or inexperience. Let's start with the worst, the nefarious aquashyster. The first two examples fall in this category. If these projects were financed, the aquashyster would have taken a huge salary while running the project into the ground within a few years and then moving on to the next location. Or they would have just taken the money and run.

The most egregious example of outright fraud occurred in the U.S. where an aquashyster set up a state-of-the-art recirculating system facility. It was truly impressive. There was an observation deck and a computer room where everything at the facility was monitored to the last detail. The constant stream of potential inves-

tors who visited this facility became actual investors when they were told that this was the future of aquaculture and contracts to duplicate the facility were about to be signed in many countries. What the investors were not told was that the fish, which sold for about \$2 per pound, cost about \$10 per pound to produce in this ultramodern facility and that there were no foreign contracts in the works. This company was actually in the business of growing investors, not fish. Of course you can only go so far with a scheme like this until the investors demand results. Alas, the perpetrator was indicted, found guilty and sent to prison.

The next category of aquashysterism is to sell a product but lie about its capability, and lie boldly. There is a person, known by just about every professional in the field, who has been doing this for decades. The dollar amounts are not that great and the negative results could be due to extenuating circumstances. If anyone ever mentions this person's name, we tell them to stay clear, but there is a continual supply of new people entering the industry and so the business of misleading people continues.

All previous examples concern aquaculture in general, but the recent surge in the popularity of aquaponics has created a very fertile problem area. Here is a perfect example. About 15 years ago I attended a 2-day hydroponics workshop that was sponsored by a reputable hydroponic company. The number two man at this company told the audience that there is talk of integrating fish culture with hydroponics but it cannot be done. During intermission I approached him with a photo album full of pictures of vegetables being raised aquaponically. I didn't get much of a response from him, but 2 years later I read that he was the keynote speaker at an aquaponics short course. It sure didn't take him long to become an aquaponics expert.

This is a problem that is plaguing the emerging aquaponics industry today. Too many people are claiming to be experts with little or no training and little or no experience, which is resulting in a lot of system failures. Without sufficient training and experience, there is a lack of perspective and unintended consequences for decisions even if the intentions are good. In one example I am familiar with, a person who advertised as an aquaponic consultant was given \$1 million to build a commercial facility. It turned out that this person had never built an aquaponic facility of any sig-

nificant size, and what he built was a totally unworkable creation of his imagination. Conceptual ideas are no substitute for extended training, maybe in the form of internships, and years of experience with concrete evidence of success. Unfortunately, people seem all too willing to sell the very first system they build.

A lady recently called me about our upcoming aquaponics course. I informed her that the course was already full and I could not accept any more students. She said that was all right because a man, who had set up many commercial facilities in U.S., was helping her. I told her that I doubted that this person had done what he claimed. She

said, "Why are you being so negative?" I told her that I have a broad perspective of the industry and that there are not many commercial facilities in the U.S. although they are now starting to emerge. She gave this man's name, and when I Googled him I saw only one reference – his website, which consisted of many pictures and video clips of impending world disaster due to food shortages but not one picture of an aquaponic system. However, he did say that his experience with aquaponics was unparalleled. I guess the 450 or so references to my name on Google don't count.

The old adage – *buyer beware* – applies just as much to aquaponics as any other field of commerce. If you intend to buy a system, ask for some references of people who bought systems from this vendor. Do not base your judgment on price. Some systems will outlast others by decades and be more reliable and much less labor intensive, saving the price of the system many times over during its life span. Some systems are just overly complicated with too many things that can go wrong and often do go wrong. If you have difficulty deciding, seek out expert advice. Give preference to systems that have performed well for many years. I am not discounting that new designs could be better, but all you have to do is look at the automobile recall list and you will see that new designs have their risks. Look for experienced people who have been in the business for many years and have a good track record. Ask consultants to provide contact information for at least three previous clients and check them out. Beware of outrageous claims and unscrupulous people. If you can navigate these tricky waters, good aquaponics will be smooth sailing.

About the Author: *Dr. James Rakocy is the Director of the Agriculture Experiment Station at the University of the Virgin Islands. He has 30+ years experience in aquaculture and aquaponics research. He can be reached by email at jrakocy@uvi.edu.*

