

# Costa Rican tuna-farm project challenged

San José, Costa Rica

**E**nvironmentalists have fought a proposed yellowfin tuna farm since Costa Rican regulatory bodies approved it last year for a location nine miles (15 kms) off the mouth of the Golfo Dulce, a prized tropical fjord and major ecotourism destination on the country's southern Pacific coast.

Yet the leader of the rare, offshore fish-farm project, Eduardo Velarde, insists the effort would provide an alternative to the increasingly destructive fishing of wild yellowfin, thus helping to protect the species.

Along with leaders of communities fronting the Golfo Dulce, the Costa Rican green groups Marine Life Foundation and Sea Turtle Restoration Program (Pretoma) filed a pair of lawsuits with the Supreme Court's Constitutional Chamber, Sala IV. One suit points to potential environmental damage in the Golfo Dulce, which is located between the mainland and the Osa Peninsula. The other says that in approving the project, the government failed to ensure sufficient consultation with Golfito and other communities located on the Golfo Dulce.

## Environmental ruling

The court has not issued a decision on the community consultation complaint, but it ruled last month on the environmental complaint, eliciting that rarest of reactions in jurisprudence—applause by both parties. It called for a reevaluation of the speed with which currents at different depths would disperse the tuna's waste, an issue examined in the environmental impact study required by Costa Rica's National Technical Environmental Secretariat (Setena).

The project is now suspended until the issue is resolved, but upon hearing of the ruling, Velarde wrote to EcoAméricas: "We won in court." Green groups and members of the community of Golfito issued a statement declaring they, too, are pleased with the ruling.

Among the criticisms of the project is that the tuna's excrement could pollute the Golfo Dulce, which is home to a sea turtle egg-hatching program and is frequented by tropical fish, dolphins and other marine life important to commercial and sport fishing as well as to sight-seeing tourism.

Peter Aspinall, owner of an eco-lodge on Golfo Dulce called the Tiskita Jungle Lodge, is one of a number of project critics to praise the court ruling.

"We are satisfied, especially with the [suspension]," said Aspinall, who also heads the Tiskita Foundation, which funds community-service projects in the region. "Just as we have been warning, the risk posed by the massive generation of waste is too high to be taken lightly, and that is precisely what the authorities

did when they approved this project."

The proposed offshore farm would consist of 10 nylon-mesh cages 160 feet (50 meters) in diameter and 65 feet (20 meters) tall floating near the ocean's surface. Unlike bluefin tuna farms in the Mediterranean Sea, which serve as fattening pens for live-caught fish, the yellowfin farm off Golfo Dulce would raise fish from eggs. Once in full operation, the farm would produce an estimated 2,000 metric tons of tuna annually, or about 50,000 fish.

Velarde says that early on he will use the cages to store live tuna that he'll buy from fishermen and then sell when prices in the lucrative sushi market are high.

## Fishing to farming?

He hopes eventually to persuade fishermen to hang up their nets and take up tuna farming, and he defends his project on job-creation grounds. Says Velarde: "There are poverty problems in [the Caribbean port city] Limón and in Golfito. When you're talking about sustainability, people are a part of sustainability."

The location is what concerns Denise Echeverría, director of Marine Life Foundation. She argues Golfo Dulce is a rare tropical fjord where fish farming has no place. "[The farm] is a large industry, just like any farm," she says. "Imagine a pig farm, but floating in open water." She also cites the threat of disease from imported sardines used to feed the tuna. Velarde argues the sardines will be carefully screened for disease.

Such debate prompted Costa Rica's unicameral Legislative Assembly to form a commission to investigate the issue last September. José Merino, a member of the minority Frente Amplio party who headed the commission, says the farm introduces "enormous risk into a fragile ecosystem," adding: "I think we have to reject the request."

Maria Luisa Fournier, a consultant hired to conduct the project's impact study, asserts the farm's direct environmental effects would not extend beyond the 4.6-square-mile (12-sq-km) concession area that the government granted for the project. She says the waste-dispersal issue raised in the Constitutional Chamber's ruling can be handled "easily."

Fournier acknowledges that if fish farms are too numerous in a given location and use antibiotics and other chemicals, they can cause environmental degradation. But by implementing rigorous controls, she asserts, "marine aquaculture [can] achieve sustainability and become one of the main sources of employment for coastal fishing communities."

—Robert Goodier

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