

GOLD COAST MARINE AQUACULTURE

FROM PLOUGH TO PRAWNS

It was over a beer in a local hotel that the idea was floated to transform a sugar cane farm into one of Australia's leading prawn farms.

Noel Herbst was a third generation dairy and sugar cane farmer but following the downturn in the industry in 1984, he decided to diversify. At a time when the aquaculture industry was still finding its feet in Australia, he took the gamble and transformed one of his sugar cane farms at the mouth of the Logan River into a prawn farm.

Starting with no knowledge and after a succession of failures, by the early 1990s Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture had managed to build up a good reputation and client base. At that time it was producing post larvae and black tiger prawns, with demand outstripping all it could grow in the few ponds it had in operation.

With both the prawn farm and the remaining sugar farm becoming more demanding, Mr Herbst decided to sell his sugarcane interest and invest everything in his 102-acre prawn farm. He hasn't looked back.

As there was no real prawn farming expertise in Australia, Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture secured the services of a marine biologist from Thailand.

The company now employs between 18 and 30 staff, depending on seasons.

"We gradually built up the infrastructure into the 24 one-hectare ponds we have today," said Mr Herbst.

"We have also built supporting feed and mechanical sheds, two new hatcheries, "raceways" for breeding brood stock, processing factory, spawner and algae

rooms. It was a continual process of trial and error because there were no guidelines. Now we are in the process of expanding the size of the farm to 50 ponds."

In the beginning, Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture had to actively promote its product to secure a fledgling market. It found the best method was the taste test – and this was the key to its early sales success.

These days, the consistent quality of its farm prawns means it commands a premium price for its product.

Achieving unusually large harvests of about eight to 10 tonnes per hectare (almost twice the state average) means it has been able to move the business from direct sales to wholesale and export markets.

Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture also works with, supports and has provided sponsorship for numerous research programs with institutions including the CSIRO, Queensland Department of Primary Industries & Fisheries, Queensland University of Technology, University of Queensland and the Australian Institute of Marine Sciences.

It is continually involved in research and development to maintain and improve its product, production and environmental practices.

"The future sustainability of the industry relies on the quality of water in the Logan River, therefore sound environmental practices are essential," said Mr Herbst.

"We take a proactive stance, and to that end we have developed a water recycling system which, if successful, would be of great benefit to the industry and help with Australia's clean and green image."

Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture is the only farm in Australia, and only one of four known in the world, to establish a polymerase chain reaction testing laboratory to ensure viruses prevalent in the wild are not introduced to the farm from incoming stock. It is this kind of thorough farming practice that has seen Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture obtain Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service (AQIS) certification of Food Processing Accreditation – a license to export direct from the farm as well as AS/NZS ISO 9002 Quality Assurance Accreditation.

Some of the awards it has already achieved include the 1998 Queensland Seafood "SEAQUAL" Gold Award for Leadership in Quality Management presented by the Queensland Premier, the 2000 Queensland Primary Industries Farm Management Award, the 2004 Gold Coast Excellence Family Business Award, the 2004 and 2005 Business High Achievers Awards, 2000 Beenleigh/Yatala Chamber of Commerce Champion of Champions Award, and from the Royal National Agricultural Society - Sydney Fine Foods Show, numerous gold medals as well as the 2004 and 2005 Champion Prawn Exhibit with a special Award of Outstanding Excellence.

"The Gold Coast is ideally situated for this kind of industry," said Mr Herbst. "Add to this the transport infrastructure for fast delivery of fresh product domestically and internationally and you won't find a better location for this kind of innovative business."

Gold Coast Marine Aquaculture is situated at Woongoolba on the northern end of the Gold Coast and can be contacted on **+61 7 5546 1361** or email **gcmh@ion.com.au**

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