

MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A BURMESE WOMAN FARMER AND ENTREPRENEUR IN THE AQUACULTURE INDUSTRY IN THAILAND¹

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This article may never have appeared without a series of serendipitous events that began with the late submission of an abstract for the Aquaculture America 2012 conference in Las Vegas. May Myat Noe Lwin, who prefers to be called Noe Noe, sent in her abstract with the same title as this article but it arrived after all the appropriate sessions had been filled. Steven Rawles, the Technical Program Chair, passed it to me because I was hosting a session called *Aquaculture Pioneers: Life & Times and Lessons Learned*, featuring presentations by six well-known senior scientists with long careers in aquaculture. At first thought, it seems that Noe Noe's career and record is not comparable to those older and more experienced presenters in the session. By coincidence, I had collaborated on a funding proposal involving Noe Noe and Aquaculture without Frontiers (AwF), of which I am Executive Director. Knowing of her work, I was honored to have this dynamic young woman present in the Aquaculture Pioneers session. She is clearly an aquaculture pioneer and has done much to distinguish herself at such a young age. Fortunately space opened up in the session and I was able to accommodate her presentation.

Noe Noe was the last speaker of the session, indeed of the whole conference, and she captivated and amazed the audience with her personal story of a young, confident, and determined Burmese woman building a business in Thailand, of entrepreneurship, of seafood commerce, of challenges overcome, and of the people who helped her along the way. "I had not planned to become a crab farmer. It just happened while I was home visiting my family." And so began the presentation given by May Myat Noe Lwin (Noe Noe) at Aquaculture America 2012 in Las Vegas.

EDUCATION

After finishing secondary school, Noe Noe enrolled in 2000 in Yangon Eastern University in Yangon, Myanmar, graduating with a B.Sc. in Physics in 2003. Following her interest in education, in 2004 Noe Noe began graduate studies for a Master's degree in Education at Assumption University in Thailand. She also started working as a school teacher at See Phi Naung Japanese International School in Bangkok, Thailand. She was awarded an M.Ed. degree in Curriculum & Instruction from Assumption University, Bangkok, in 2009.



May Myat Noe Lwin (Noe Noe), owner of CNN Soft Shell Crab Farm.

OPENING AN AQUACULTURE SUPPLY BUSINESS

During her university years, Noe Noe's uncle, Mr. Zaw Zaw Naing, worked as a technician at a freshwater prawn hatchery and prawn farms outside the city. On school holidays she would return to Yangon to visit her family. It was during such a visit in 2006 that she happened to talk with her uncle about his prawn farming experiences. He mentioned the difficulties he and other prawn farmers were having in obtaining equipment and other supplies to use on their farms. This planted the seed of a business idea in her mind, which she developed with the help of her uncle and his boss, U Shan Kyi. It was not long before Noe Noe was shopping for supplies and equipment in Bangkok using a list drawn up by her uncle and shipping everything back to him

in Yangon; thus, CNN Aquaculture Supply was born. Noe Noe continued to teach at the school while she developed her supply business and her entrepreneurial skills. Eventually, she and her uncle opened a retail store in Yangon.

In March 2008, Noe Noe resigned from her teaching position to focus on her business activities full-time, inasmuch as her responsibilities had multiplied considerably. She was now purchasing aquaculture supplies from Thailand, making deliveries to Myanmar, sourcing products and handling sales and marketing in Myanmar (and eventually India and Indonesia), and translating product information from Thai to Burmese.

CRAB FARMING IN SOUTH THAILAND

Noe Noe's interest in the business of aquaculture, specifically crab farming, deepened in 2008. Realizing that she needed to know more about the technical side of farming, she enrolled in a short course on soft-shell crab farming offered by the Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDEC) in the Philippines. Successfully completing the course, she decided to set up her own soft-shell crab farm in late 2008.

In a bold move, Noe Noe abandoned her career in education to become an aquapreneur, giving up her profession and lifestyle as a teacher in Bangkok to become a crab farmer. She chose to relocate near the town of Ranong, located on the western coast of south Thailand, about 600 km from Bangkok. Ranong is a border town with many people crossing back and forth into Kawthaung, Myanmar. This location would provide her easy access to her business network in Yangon.

So began a long list of challenges for a young Burmese woman trying to set up a business in Thailand, not the least of which was that she did not know anyone in town. However, she persisted and, in doing so, revealed the qualities that captivated the attention of the audience in that Las Vegas conference room.

The rest of this article is in Noe Noe's words from her presentation.

REASONS I AM INTERESTED IN AQUACULTURE

I found aquaculture very interesting because we are producing food and that is a top priority. There are so many roles to play in aquaculture and you must have a variety of skills to be successful, such as technical and financial management as well as finding markets. My other priority is that I want to create jobs for people.

My main interest has been in crab farming. I took the crab seed production course from SEAFDEC in the Philippines and then decided to set up my own soft-shell crab farm. It took me two to three months to find a suitable farm and I didn't have any friends or family in that part of Thailand where the farm was located. It was very hard for a young Burmese woman who wanted to be a crab farmer. Most Thai landowners could not believe that I wanted to set up a soft-shell crab farm.

WHY SOFT-SHELL CRAB FARMING?

The most lucrative market for crab farmers is the production of soft-shell crabs, which are held in individual cages and examined every four hours for molting. Within four hours of molting, the crabs must be moved from saltwater to freshwater to keep the new shell soft. The crabs are collected from the wild by fishermen and sold to farmers. The crabs must be individually tied to prevent them from crushing one another with their



Harvesting red tilapia from polyculture pond.



Packing mud crab for market.



Mussel meats going to market.

powerful claws, then sorted, untied, placed in individual cages consisting of plastic boxes with holes and fed every other day with small forage fish.

The farm I rent had been an old shrimp pond and allowed to run down by the previous owner. I had to put in many long hours and cash to bring it back into production. The secret to success in crab farming is tender loving care. Because we are dealing with live animals, it is important to care about each animal even though there are so many.

While farming, I was also still doing my aquaculture supply business in Myanmar to provide extra cash to keep the farm growing. As the farm yield has grown, I have looked for other opportunities to generate short-term business. At first this meant buying and selling live horseshoe crabs. After I trained staff and developed a regular market, I decided to diversify with other crab products, including live horseshoe crabs, live mud crabs, crab meat, spanner crabs, frozen soft-shell mud crabs and eventually live groupers. Later, I bought my neighbor's ponds and started another farm to polyculture red tilapia and white shrimp, and more soft-shell crab.

At the same time, I started giving a training course to farmers who wanted to start their own soft-shell crab farms and was invited to give presentations about soft-shell mud crab

farming at professional conferences. Moreover, I volunteered for Aquaculture without Frontiers (AwF) and the AquaFish Collaborative Research Support Program (CRSP). In 2009, I co-authored a manual on soft-shell mud crab farming with a SEAFDEC mentor, which was published by SEAFDEC.⁴

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The following are the challenges I face as a young Burmese woman crab farmer and seafood entrepreneur in Thailand.

Market. Because I come from a third-world country and most people think the products coming from Burmese people are cheap. Most buyers offer low prices for my products. It took me a lot of time and effort to find the right market.

Investment. I am a young Burmese person so I cannot borrow any money from the bank. Although I showed all my documents and records, I was never able to obtain a bank loan. With limited investment capital, it takes me more time and hard work to maintain my small business.

Supply. It was hard to get supplies of wild crabs for stocking my farm because many collectors had been doing it for a long time with established buyers. Unless I paid higher prices to the fishermen, or to suppliers who collected from multiple fishermen, they were not willing to sell to me. It was hard for the suppliers to believe that I would buy consistently from them because I am a young woman and only started my business five years ago. So I had to convince small suppliers to sell to me, even if it was only 20 to 50 kg of crabs. I spent a lot of time looking for suppliers who will sell to me.

Languages. Myanmar people who live in Ranong are migrant workers coming from southern Myanmar and they have their own dialect. I came from Yangon so I didn't fully understand what they were saying. I had to learn the southern Burmese dialect and Thai language at the same time. Being able to speak Burmese, Thai and English has helped me a lot with my business and made it easier for me to get crabs because most suppliers were Burmese. I was able to find markets in different parts of Thailand and, eventually, international markets.



First farm with crab cages and bridge, started with 40,000 crabs.



Crew stocking cages with crabs for grow-out.



Red tilapia pens in polyculture pond.

Human Resource Management. These were my most difficult challenges. Most of my employees were male and I was a young female, so I needed to show them a good example and that I was serious about what I was doing. Inasmuch as most of my employees were Burmese living in Thailand, I had to deal with all the personal issues of employees getting married, having children, sending money back to Myanmar to support family, getting work permits and various health issues, which required my acting as interpreter for doctors at the health clinic. None of us had farming experience before so we all worked hard and I involved them in most of the decisions I made.

Isolation. I could not find any young people who were interested in crab farming. I think I was the youngest among all of the farmers in Ranong. It is a small town and hard to find friends. As the result, I saved more money and thought about work all the time.

Initial Racial Prejudice. Ninety percent of Burmese people living in Ranong, Thailand are manual workers, so it was hard for many Thai people to accept me at the beginning. Some of the other soft-shell crab farmers did not appreciate a new competitor.

The following are my coping strategies for dealing with all of these problems and challenges.

Awareness of Opportunities. Although I have a market for my products, I am always aware of other market opportunities. Everywhere I go I try to talk to new people and go to the market to find out what

seafood people are interested in eating these days; what are the market prices, what other seafood products I could sell and who are the reliable buyers.

As the farm began producing soft-shell crabs for sale, I was delivering a few dozen per day to a nearby processing plant, barely enough to pay for gasoline and a couple of farm helpers,

so I found some restaurants and stores to sell to directly. Awareness on business trips helped me to grow my seafood business. I started everything very small but now these businesses are well established.

Honesty in Business. As a young businesswoman in a foreign country, with no family or professional contacts and limited financial resources, I find that complete honesty is my best asset. Always paying my suppliers and staff and being honest about product quality gives me opportunities where others failed. Quick and honest answers and communication require that I answer the phone and respond to text messages at all hours in Burmese, Thai and/or English.

Effective Cash Flow Management. With only limited funds and no bank line of credit, I balance payments and income on an hourly basis. Frequently, I sell products within hours of receiving them from fishermen so that I can pay them before the end of the day, when they leave the pier.

Accurate Recording of Business Dealings. Most of my work is done with a handshake and no written agreements. Keeping track of the money I owe multiple fishermen and suppliers and the income I am owed by multiple customers, is a constant effort. Quick notes in a log book I carry, along with text messages on my phone, are collated into a spreadsheet every night.

Personal Integrity in Leading by Example. As an aspiring aquaculture businesswoman in a border town with established prejudices against Burmese migrant workers, I have found that my personal integrity is my most important asset. Many of my Thai suppliers and customers only hire Burmese as day laborers or domestic help. By always being honest and paying bills on time, I demonstrate that Burmese and aquaculture farmers in general, can be good seafood business partners. It is important to me and my staff to demonstrate that immigrant



Live grouper for market.



Growing tanks for grouper and lobster.



Live hauling grouper and lobster.

workers can be successful and important contributors to the local community. I have worked hard to improve my Thai language skills and try to always have a positive and cheerful disposition.

Sharing. I always believe in sharing. The people who share the most get sharing from others. By sharing what I know about the biology and business of soft-shell crab farming and other aquaculture, other people, including neighboring Thai soft-shell crab farmers, have been kind enough to share their knowledge with me in exchange. As my business has grown, my honest approach and willingness to share ideas and contacts has been rewarded by others sharing with me. Aquaculture professionals have invited me to speak about what I have learned and share my experiences at workshops and conferences, where I have learned even more.

In closing, I want to thank so many of you in the aquaculture community who are reading this, who have been so kind to me as I have grown my farms and business interests. Please come visit my farm in Ranong, Thailand. Thank you so much.

Notes

¹ Noe Noe dedicates this article to the memory of her uncle, U Win Thein, who supported her from the beginning and who recently passed away from cancer. He came to live in Ranong because Noe Noe was there and stayed to help her grow her business. "He was an honest and hard-working man."

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⁴ Quintio, E.T. and Noe Lwin, M.M. 2009. Soft-shell mud crab farming. SEAFDEC/AQD, Iloilo, Philippines.