Pangasius: why is it being farmed intensively along the rivers of Southeast Asia?

Sometimes they come back. Or maybe they weren’t gone in the first place. This is the case with the pangasius catfish, which is being talked about again these days. Freshwater species like the pangasius – endemic to the Mekong Basin, Chao Phraya and Maeklong in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand – have been an important food source for local communities for centuries. In the 2000s it began to be raised intensively, quickly becoming one of the most common farmed fish species.

Since then, the pangasius catfish has started to spread throughout in the international markets as well, and its meat, both frozen and in fillets, has hit supermarkets shelves, school cafeterias and restaurant tables. The pangasius grows fast, costs very little and has a fairly mild and delicate taste; enormous advantages that have contributed to a rapid increase in sales in the world, like other farmed fish. But these benefits have not made its production immune to criticism and suspicion: pangasius meat has a poor nutritional profile and is very low in omega-3 – an important factor since the
promotion of fish consumption is largely based the presence of these fatty acids. The breeding sites are situated at one of along one of the most polluted rivers in the world, which has cast serious doubts on their health. Finally, cases of fraud are not uncommon, where the pangasius is sold labelled as more expensive species like groupers or tub gurnards.

The main market for pangasius in Europe is Spain, which purchased 23,179 tones from Vietnam in 2015 for 47.6 million euros. In recent years, there has been a slight decline in demand and sales of pangasius could drop further. However, despite reassurances from the scientific community regarding consumer health – numerous analyses on imported product samples haven’t found evidence of chemical contamination, antibiotic residue or other pollutants – Carrefour and other supermarkets have decided to withdraw the fish from their shelves. The German retail giant Lidl now only sells pangasius where a sustainably certification is present, while Italian supermarkets like Coop and Esselunga have also banned it altogether.

Why? Because pangasius farms have a particularly high environmental impact, an aspect that has been highlighted by many NGOs in recent years. Greenpeace, for instance, pointed out that the increase in demand necessitates even more intensive production, leading to even more pollution and endangering protected areas, such as mangroves.
Large retail chains have not been the only ones to say no to pangasius: recently, the Committee of Economic Policies for Italy’s Emilia-Romagna region voted to replace pangasius in school canteens with local seafood. “It means more support for local economies,” explains Valentina Tepedino, agency director of the Eurofishmarket consultancy, “and an attempt to provide schoolchildren with a more nutritious diet. The experiment has already been successful in the Marche region where Pappafish has been bringing red mullets, anchovies and tub gurnards to school canteens for four years and the amount of waste has fallen from 54 % to 8 %.”

**The 8th edition of Slow Fish will be held in Genoa’s Porto Antico from May 18-21, where we confront themes related to fish, fishing, freshwaters and oceans. Entrance is free!**

**For more information on Slow Fish, check the campaign website.**