

# Stirling graduates in business

Number 4. - Warren Turner MSc 1990-1991, by Janet H. Brown



Warren's name is one that will be familiar to many readers of Aquaculture News. He has hosted a number of Stirling students over the years since he began operating his tilapia farm in Thailand. But I can personally attest to his ability to get noticed. When I first met Warren he was recovering from an encounter with death and his thigh was totally encased in bandages. At a VSO conference he had leapt off a balcony into Songkhla Lake, not yet being fully aware of the dangers of gravity and shallow water. He landed on a sharpened tree branch which passed through his leg – one could only squirm to think of how much worse it could have been – but how much better for everyone if he had not been quite so exuberant! For many people such an accident could have lead to a pathological fear of fish ponds. But for Warren, a life time's passion for fish could not be switched off so easily. His VSO work was at Songkhla Fisheries College 1987-1990 where he was no doubt influenced by Stirling graduate Don Griffiths (MSc 1984-1985). This is where I also met him as I was there in 1988 setting up our field station at Songkhla for our ODA shrimp farming project.

Warren's passion for fish had first led him to take his degree at Liverpool, doing his honours work in Port Erin 1982-83 and after that working for 2½ years as manager of Riverside Fisheries, a trout farm in St. Johns on the Isle of Man. He realised the limits of trout farming and set off on VSO to find some dirtier water to jump into. They must have been delighted to have someone with his experience, but not so much about getting an accident liability.

Whether it was contact with the Stirling folk in Songkhla (Matt Briggs [MSc 1984-1985 PhD 1995] was also working out there at the shrimp field station for much of this time)

that sparked his ambition to come to do the MSc course I am not sure, but, as Warren talked of his Stirling experience, it was clear he had found the course highly rewarding. He spoke particularly of his thesis on capital costing which has proved invaluable ever since. He said he went to Stirling with practical experience but then found the training in surveying and aquaculture engineering particularly useful –indeed the handouts from the latter are still a much consulted resource for him! He was motivated by fish, but never envisaged being a business man. Stirling gave him the tools for this transformation, and lack of work opportunities provided the drive.

No one can deny now that he is a business man. It was not however an overnight change. After the MSc course, he went to work with Dave Little (MSc 1982-1983 PhD 1989) producing monosex tilapia at Romsai farm, the first hapa-based, sex reversal hatchery in Thailand. This work led to increasing awareness of the advantages of growing 100% male tilapia and created a demand for monosex fry in Thailand. During the 2½ years Warren spent at Romsai Farm and AIT, there were gradual improvements in the technology and the idea of starting a business began to grow. Meeting Worapot and Pramot (his Thai business partners) was the catalyst to going ahead, and also meeting his Thai wife Bu, then a research assistant at AIT, was another very important piece in completing the puzzle. Money was the main problem, as Warren only had a small amount given to him by his Granddad many years before. Fortunately, Worapot was confident and trusting enough to lend Warren money for his share and his Mum and brother also invested. The risk paid off and, 12 years later, the hatchery (Nam Sai Farms), located in Prachinburi province, covers an area of 80 hectares and employs 200 staff. His set up is even being franchised with the first branch in Nakhon Pathom province (west side of Bangkok). Just like better known franchising schemes, Warren's provides the training and full back up.

Growth such as this is not easy and not without its problems. With hatchery work, particularly monosex tilapia (there are many con men around), building a reputation is paramount and it took 2 years before they could expect a return on their considerable investment. But Warren is modest enough to

also acknowledge lucky breaks, some of which may not be evident at the time, for example, finding the right partners and certainly getting land in Ban Sang, Prachinburi, after previously looking at sites in Chachoengsao and Nakhon Sawan provinces. Now that the new airport has taken over a large tilapia farming area in Samutprakhan province and with the continual expansion of Bangkok taking over other areas, Prachinburi, still quite rural, is becoming the new source of aquatic products for Bangkok.

Twelve years on in monosex tilapia technology and there are still many problems to overcome. Many of these are seasonal and some come and go. Hot weather, which is very extreme during April to June, has a huge impact on egg yield and quality and can vary from year to year. In 1998, for example, "El Nino" caused very hot and dry conditions from March to December. Production was at a trickle due to poor egg production and farmers were short of water. Warren is constantly looking for solutions and has funded students from Stirling to do research on nursery methods, fry transport and nutrition. There was even a PhD on broodstock management, which included use of heat controls, conducted at the farm. A lot of investment has gone into raised shading, sprinklers and aerators to provide more control and ultimately better fry quality. Overheads are now very high and it is crucial that close control of the process at all points is maintained, since as Warren says, "when you start to lose money, you lose it big time." Staff training plays a large part in this and there are now 20 aquaculture graduates working on site, with one senior staff member about to do an MSc.

Things have changed quite a lot since the early days when all Warren wanted to do was to earn a living from rearing fish and to jump in the odd lake now and again. I interviewed him for this article while he was on holiday in Scotland – how was he spending his time? He was fishing on Loch Awe for a week in pouring rain! It is always great to find someone making a living following his passion. Keep up the good work Warren.

You can read more about Warren's farm at <http://www.tilapiathai.com/>

If you are a "Stirling graduate in business" who would like to be featured in this series please e mail me at [j.h.brown@stir.ac.uk](mailto:j.h.brown@stir.ac.uk)