



Israel Snir: Investing in People, Not Just Tilapia

By Jill Schwartz

As the temperature hovered around the freezing mark outside, Israel Snir sat inside a warm café in one of Washington, DC's trendy neighborhoods. He was in town to testify at a hearing about organic standards for aquaculture but, that morning, his mind was back in Honduras. The same cold front that had hit Washington, DC also had hit Honduras, where Israel helps operate one of the world's largest fresh filet tilapia farms – Aquafinca, owned by Regal Springs Group.

Israel's eyes were fixated on his laptop. He was waiting for an email message from his son, who was home managing the farm. For Israel, it brought back memories from 17 years ago, when a cold snap killed all of the farm's fish (1,600 tons). Back then, when the farm was relatively new and the staff was small, he had no choice but to show leadership. Almost single-handedly, with support from the farm's investors, he created a game plan to bring the farm back to life.

This time was different. Despite several offers to hop on the next plane back to Honduras so he could help out on the farm, Israel was told not to worry. Everything was under control. The farms' employees had worked through the night to avert a disaster from occurring. They showed as much concern for the farm as did Israel.

Why? Aquafinca, as Israel describes it, is more than just a place to work. It is the heart and drive of the surrounding communities. Under Israel's leadership, Regal Springs has invested millions of dollars into the communities' education and welfare systems by building schools and health clinics, providing educational materials for 80 schools, hiring people to teach farm workers of all ages how to read and write, providing private medical insurance to the employees, and much more.

"This business is not about the fish," said Israel, a 40 year veteran of the aquaculture industry who is now Regal Springs' senior vice president. "It is about the people. Without the people, we have nothing. And without Regal Springs, the people have less."

That is why Israel is leading the charge within the Tilapia Aquaculture Dialogue to create standards that will minimize tilapia farming's impact on local communities (a.k.a. social impacts). They will be combined with standards that address the key environmental impacts and, ultimately, help ensure tilapia farming is economically viable.

"The beauty of the Dialogue is that I feel like my voice is heard," Israel said. "People in the Dialogue, including me, have different opinions but we all work together to find common ground."

Having grown up in Israel on a kibbutz, Israel has a strong sense of community. When given the chance, he has applied that ethic to jobs he has held on farms in Jamaica, Ecuador, Columbia, Costa Rica, Africa and Mexico. Aquafinca is where Israel feels he has had the chance to live out his dream in the grandest scale.

The cold snap of 1991 described above, which happened just a few months after he began working at Aquafinca, was his blessing in disguise. With no fish left on the farm, the farm's investors felt like they had no other choice but to lay off all of the workers. Israel, instead, asked them for \$100,000 so he could keep the employees on the payroll as long as they were willing to help rebuild the farm. It was a better alternative than sending them back into poverty. The move, he told the investors, would show Aquafinca's commitment to the community, not just to making money off of tilapia products.

They came through. Within six months, the farm was up and running again.

From there, Aquafinca's new "religion" of investing in people was born. Israel's family now extends beyond his nine sons and daughters to a broadly defined family of almost 1,500 people.

One of the biggest investments the company has made in the local community is financing the start-up of other tilapia farms. Through its Fish for Trees program, Regal Springs annually gives to local residents 10 percent of its fingerlings, feed and tilapia cages. One major farm and many smaller tilapia farms have been created since the program began 10 years ago. This is a better business alternative, Israel believes, than continuing the tradition of clearing forest land to create marginal agricultural farms. As a result of the program, fewer trees are cut and more land and water resources are protected.

The new tilapia farm owners sell their tilapia to Regal Springs and develop their own markets. They are making a profit, which is a tremendous achievement in a country where most people survive on less than \$60 a month. The profit is invested back into the communities' infrastructure, such as its schools, to spur growth and prosperity. Some of the profit was used to create a tilapia processing facility.

Although he knows the science of tilapia farming, Israel spends 90 percent of his time working on the social issues related to farming at Aquafinca.

"Because tilapia is produced by the poorest people in the poorest countries, we have a responsibility to be very careful in considering the social impacts on our environmental decisions," said Israel. "This is a responsibility I welcome and embrace."