

Badger Bay's Aquaman

When Juan Roberts started farming mussels in Triton, Newfoundland and Labrador in 1988 he was just trying to find a way to not have to move away for work.

Fast forward 30 years and Roberts is now the CEO of one of the province's top aquaculture businesses, Badger Bay Mussel Farms Ltd. It produces approximately five million pounds of the shellfish annually to the blue mussel-loving masses and employs 30 people. *Natural Resources Magazine* talked to Roberts recently about this aquaculture success story.

Natural Resources Magazine: What made you decide to get into mussel farming in 1988?

Juan Roberts: At the time I didn't know if it was a viable thing. I was trained in computers. It was something we started, and thought might work here and might keep me in Newfoundland. The first harvest we sold was in 1991 or 1992 and I think it was 25,000 or 30,000 pounds. We thought that was a big thing. Now we're selling four or five million pounds annually.

NRM: Why has demand for Newfoundland and Labrador blue mussels grown to the point you are selling millions of pounds of the shellfish?

JR: A lot it has to do with the environment. They are grown in colder water and deeper water. Where we are situated on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, we get the Labrador current coming down to us. You can't get much colder than that. I think that's what gives the mussels a sweeter, more succulent taste. It's also due to the salinity levels and there are no pesticides in our water.

NRM: Where are the biggest markets for your mussels?

JR: About 50-55 per cent go to the United States and another 40-45 per cent go to Canada. We sell fresh mussels and frozen, one-pound retail packs as well.

NRM: What's the biggest challenge facing aquaculture businesses with regards to growing production and sales?

JR: We have always been expanding our production. But you need the water to grow the mussels. In order to get more water and expand we are going to need a lot of help from the government. It's not so much about money, it's more to do with red tape and infrastructure and getting farming sites approved. If I want five sites tomorrow to grow another

three million pounds of mussels, I have to depend on government to approve those sites and work together, so I can get the sites approved in a timely manner. The process is not that simple.

NRM: What impact is aquaculture having on the provincial economy and rural communities like Triton?

JR: There is nothing wrong with having those big oil projects. We need it all. But they are not long-term. We've been around 30 years. Aquaculture businesses last a long time. If you've got 10 jobs here that's 10 families it's supporting. We need mussel, oyster and salmon farming and anything else we can grow. Everywhere else in the world they are growing it all. When you go to trade shows you realize how much fish and kelp and everything that can be grown to earn money.

NRM: How do you feel about the future of the provincial aquaculture sector?

JR: You've got to have tough skin in this business. You are dealing with Mother Nature all the time. Things happen. You lose product. If you get a 130-kilometre wind storm, you've got to make sure those sites have the gear to withstand it. We now have the only ice-free [farming] site in Atlantic Canada. That is going to play a big part in our growth in the future. In Atlantic Canada we've run out of mussels twice in five years in March. There were no mussels for about two weeks. That's not going to cut it. That's why we went after these sites that are ice-free. We are growing mussels at them to offset times there is any trouble at our other sites. |nrm



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Juan Roberts
CEO, Badger Bay Mussel Farms Ltd.

FEEDBACK

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