

# LETTERS to the EDITOR

## MARICULTURE

Sir,—The inclusion of mariculture in Sean MacBride's list of areas for possible co-operation between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and the proposal that greater Government support is called for (address to New Ireland Forum, October 4th) is extremely heartening for those of us involved in development of the Irish mariculture industry. There are, however, a number of points which immediately spring to mind. Firstly, while it is true that as an island nation we have a great deal of sea-coast, it would be wrong to give the impression that much of this is suitable for mariculture. There are surprisingly few good sites which offer suitable biological and physical characteristics and not all of these are available for development. Mariculture is by no means a panacea for the economic problems of remote coastal regions, but it does offer some distinct advantages.

Mr MacBride's comment that Ireland has been very slow to develop the industry has inherent in it the suggestion that Government intervention is the main factor which has been lacking. This is only partly true. There has in fact been a great deal of Government action but the results have been very disappointing. From a research viewpoint, Ireland possesses one of the best sited and equipped shellfish laboratories in Europe or the USA. The Carna laboratory has pioneered the development of low cost oyster hatcheries and has provided an invaluable practical service to the development of this emerging industry. Apart from the supporting role which the universities have played and are con-

tinuing to play, other agencies have also been active: BIM, NBST, and the Department of Fisheries and Forestry have all been vigorous in their supporting roles despite the inadequate funds which they have had available for this work. In addition of course, the EEC FEOGA scheme has provided grants which, together with the Irish Government contribution can cover up to 60% of the capital cost of grow-out facilities. In addition to the above research, educational, technical and economic assistance, Udaras na Gaeltachta and the ESB have supported what were initially pilot demonstration forms along the west coast which have since become commercial ventures. The intensity of mariculture activities in areas where potential has been considered to exist has led to a number of private and co-operative projects becoming established. With so much support and interest, having been displayed already, I believe that we should be asking why more development has not taken place rather than proposing that more Government support is all that is needed. In view of the problems which marine farms have faced over the last few years it is clear that some change in direction is indicated.

The lessons of past experience should be applied to future development. To a large extent this is already taking place and the Irish Aquaculture Association, various producer groups, as well as the individual farmers are aware of the problems. The main points are:

1. Structure of present grant system precludes support for purchases of marine livestock or feed.

2. Technical problems of various mariculture systems have not been recognised by many of those entering the business.

3. Inadequate engineering and unsuitable site characteristics have caused the majority of production problems.

4. There has been very inadequate support for existing farmers in the fields of disease diagnosis and control, and in international marketing. (This has been due to inadequate funds being made available.)

Recent fisheries legislation has been designed to promote mariculture development and it is hoped that it will reduce the bureaucratic jungle which those of us who set up farms in the past five or six years have had to face. It is clear, however, that if the potential which mariculture has to develop employment and promote economic growth in remote coastal areas is to be realised, then we should take a closer look at the realities of the industry and ensure that existing problems are tackled. In view of the fact that Mr MacBride's faith in the future of mariculture is in fact justified, it is vital now that the damaged confidence of investors, politicians and financial institutions is repaired by our existing ventures proving their economic viability. In this way we can establish a solid foundation for future growth of the industry and will become independent of grant support. — Yours, etc.,

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