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Farmed fish to take over from wild seafood on dinner table

By Emiko Terazono in London [Author alerts](#)

Fish farmed in pens and ponds are to take over from freshly caught seafood on the world's dinner tables and restaurant menus, with soaring prices and a growing appetite for high-end species triggering a boom in aquaculture.

A sharp shift towards farmed fish is the result of strong demand for seafood, stoked by the health benefits of eating fish and an increase in consumption across the developing world.

According to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, per capita fish consumption of farmed fish is forecast to rise 4.4 per cent in 2014 from a year ago to an annual 10.3kg, rising for the first time above the equivalent figure for wild fish, which is forecast to fall 1.5 per cent to 9.7kg.

"Aquaculture has not only become a reality in its contribution to the food we eat, we are now eating more of it compared to wild fish," says Audun Lem at the FAO.

The increased demand comes as farmed fish prices have risen to record highs. Global fish prices – both farmed and wild – have leapt to all-time highs as the growing appetite for more expensive varieties has run up against lower production due to disease and other supply issues.

While demand in traditional markets such as Japan, one of the leading importers of seafood, has been weak, consumption in the US and Europe has grown, in part a result of tentative economic recovery. Buying from countries such as Mexico, Brazil, China and in Africa have also underpinned demand.

"The only way to satisfy this new demand is aquaculture," says Gorjan Nikolik, an analyst at Rabobank.

The rise in aquaculture could mean less price swings in fish price. Frank Asche, a marine economist and professor at the University of Stavanger in Norway, says: "Research shows that aquaculture prices are less volatile than wild fish prices, so a higher market share from aquaculture should reduce price volatility."

Nevertheless, supply shortages have affected some farmed seafood species. These include salmon and shrimp, which have been hit by disease and climate change. Wild fisheries are also suffering a decline in fish population because of overfishing, pollution and climate change.

The state of wild fisheries will top the agenda this week at an FAO-hosted biennial gathering of fishing ministers, industry executives and non-governmental organisations in Rome.

The growth of farmed fish is likely to pose its own challenges. There will be continued upward pressure on feed prices, which have been at high levels due to a fall in catches of anchovies and other small oil fish used as fish feed. The limited areas where fish farms can be built and constraints on water supplies impose logistical constraints.

The most serious issue is the rise in disease affecting farmed fish. The south east Asian shrimp industry has been hit with early mortality syndrome, while Chile's salmon industry has been damaged by a virus. European oyster prices have surged due to production declines in France, which has been hit by a herpes virus.

Mr Lem says that the challenge for the farmed fish sector is to instil good farming processes. "The agricultural sector has been working on this for hundreds of years, but aquaculture has only had a few generations to address the issue," he says.

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