

“Telling Our Story”: It has been just over a month since I returned from South Africa where I was fortunate enough to attend the WAS meeting in Cape Town. I want to express my gratitude to the USAS and WAS for allowing me to take part in such a well-organized and energizing event. My compliments to the organizing committee, Bill Daniels, John Cooksey, the WAS home office, and all of the staff at Conference Management for making our inaugural conference in Africa so memorable. As this was my first trip to Africa I wanted to involve my family, so my wife and son joined me in the adventure. Following the meeting we spent a few more days in Cape Town and then flew over to the Eastern side of South Africa for a safari in a white rhino reserve. What a magnificent country. The people we met were extremely friendly and the vistas and wildlife were spectacular. It took me almost a month to go through the more than 4000 photographs captured on the journey, and we only visited one region of one country on this wondrous continent.

When we returned home and told people we had been in Africa their immediate response was, “Oh, were you on a mission trip?” When we told them it was for business and vacation they just couldn’t imagine. We described the beauty and the wonder but it was difficult for most to comprehend. Their mental picture of Africa has been clouded by what they see and hear in the media. They think poverty, civil unrest and political turmoil and not magnificent natural wonders and friendly, determined people. My point is that media has a way of influencing people’s perceptions. It is the same with aquaculture.

All of us involved with aquaculture know that it will play an ever-increasing role in supplying protein to the world’s growing population, but many consumers in the US still struggle with the conflicting media reports related to aquaculture. Aquaculture in the US has “grown up” in the digital age and has encountered much more public scrutiny than other, more traditional, animal protein production systems (beef, poultry and pork). Often media outlets compete to have the most sensational headlines to catch the reader’s eye and unfortunately, bad news is easier to sell than the good. People are so busy that they rarely take the time to look beyond the headline. “Even though the wealth of information on food production available to consumers has never been better, the public’s lack of awareness of and experience with aquaculture makes it difficult for people to know what information to trust”¹ (FAO, 2015). Most sensationalized “news” stories begin with a kernel of truth but often end up biased because reporters lack a good frame of reference or are deliberately misled by misinformation provided by agenda driven NGOs or competitors.

We as an industry must do a better job of telling our story. Every industry experiences growing pains and sometimes scrutiny inspires us to improve our production systems but we must come together to create a unified voice. We need to help the public understand the important role that responsible aquaculture will play in addressing food security and a host of other issues related to social and economic impact in the US and around the globe. This applies at the individual level also. Some of my most enjoyable travel time is spent educating strangers about aquaculture. Ask people what they think about aquaculture and then use your knowledge to

help correct misperceptions and inspire confidence in our industry. Many of you reading this magazine are scientists devoted to improving aquaculture. I challenge each of you to develop your “elevator speech” to tell people what you do, why you do it and why they should care. A good opportunity to practice this is during the short presentations at WAS and Aquaculture America meetings. The data is important, but do not forget about the big picture. Please, take the time to *“Tell our Story”*.

¹ *Kathrin Bacher, GLOBEFISH consultant. PERCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF AQUACULTURE: A GLOBAL OVERVIEW. GLOBEFISH Research Programme, Vol. 120, Rome, FAO 2015. 35 pp.*