Shellfish industry needs to work together says Nuffield scholar

What started as pondering how competitors could produce such cheap shellfish has led Tasmanian Ian Duthie around the world in search of answers - and a realisation that industry as a whole holds the solution.

Ian, from Orford in Tasmania, says he couldn’t understand how shellfish hatcheries in other countries could sell their product to growers for half the money Australian producers could.

“They were able to basically sell for what our costs of production are, so I wanted to understand what was going on and I also wanted to find out how we could diversify the number of species we grow,” he explained.

Ian, who was awarded a scholarship in 2010, toured some of the key shellfish producing countries around the world to soak up as much knowledge as he could.

“I visited the western countries, so I went to America, Canada and France – they’re large Pacific Oyster producers, but Japan and China are basically the largest producers in the world.

I visited the three main producers up the west coast of the US as I wanted to understand their production processes, why they adopted certain technologies, what their costs were and where they thought they could improve,” he says.

For Ian, the big finding was what he calls a “collective intelligence”, in which industry works together to solve problems.

“Big picture items like ocean acidification and diseases are things that require industry to work together co-operatively to find solutions such as selective breeding, diagnostics, even professional development and letting people wind down the window and sit and talk to each other about the issues they’re having in their individual businesses,” he observed.

Ian believes while it’s all too common to find a lack of communication and collaboration within industry, problems that are too big for just one producer can be solved by working together.

“Individual cases will come and go, so at the moment it’s ocean acidification, it might be a particular disease, but if we’re not working together we’ll never be able to address those things,” he says.
While the best approach is to proactively work as an industry to solve problems, Ian says to achieve that a new attitude is needed.

“I think a lot of the time it’s reactionary, it’s ‘oh no, everything’s dead, what do we need to do now?’ and that’s not necessarily industry’s fault because it’s driven by the economics of things.

The New Zealanders for instance, 10-15 years ago they looked at doing hatchery production, having seen the gains that could be made in selective breeding, but their cost of production for wild catch was just so low that it just didn’t make economic sense to capitalise on something new and that had a level of risk associated with it.

Today however, with disease pressures and inconsistency in wild catch, hatchery production is back on the cards. So it’s a bit of a balancing act but I think the trick is to have the networks and have the relationships so you can see what is coming and you can start preparing for it,” Ian concluded.

Ian’s scholarship was supported by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation.

Nuffield Australia is an organisation which provides opportunities to Australian farmers between the ages of 28 and 40 to travel the globe investigating a research topic important to them and Australian agriculture.

Applications for the next round of Nuffield Scholarships will open on 1st April 2013, for travel in 2014.

More details can be found at www.nuffield.com.au, on twitter @nuffieldaustr or on Facebook.

You can watch Ian presenting his findings at the 2012 Nuffield Australia national conference in Toowoomba here vimeo.com/54652578