



## PROFILE

# Farmers without borders

**Annie Castaldo—Shellfish farmer at the Laguna of Thau, France**

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Annie Castaldo is a shellfish farmer working in the Laguna of Thau in the Mediterranean part of France. The farm was established by her father and grandfather, both fishers, who were given a concession by the fisheries authorities in the early 1950s. At 24, when it was time for her to officially succeed her father, Annie, having worked on the farm during every vacation through her growing years, knew pretty much all there was to know about oyster farming.

The Thau Laguna however is not the easiest of water bodies for shellfish farming. It is large—7000 m wide with an average depth of 5 meters. One fifth of its area is farmed for shellfish by about 400 shellfish enterprises. The presence of a large number of villages around the lagoon impacts its fragile ecosystem, and during certain years, oyster mortality rates are high.

Not many women in France head their own shellfish farms. This is the domain of men; moreover, until less than 20 years ago, under French law, concessions were reserved for men who had served the navy, and later, for those who had a diploma and a boating license. Legal reforms at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened up the possibility of shellfish farming for Annie, the sole child in her family, who strongly wished to continue the family tradition.

In 2003, Annie was elected to the board of the Regional Committee of Shellfish farmers of the French Mediterranean, a largely male organization that she had joined to gain help with product promotion. The experience was disastrous. Says Annie, “At first, the men didn’t let us speak, and later, they didn’t listen.”

Luckily Annie found support coming her way. She came across an organization, CIVAM that provided skill development training to shellfish farmers to help them teach tourists and other visitors about shellfish culture, types of shellfish, and the importance of preserving the lagoon’s ecosystem.

This work soon became Annie’s vocation. Along with some other women, she set up a women’s group dedicated to this work, which ran successfully for several years doing varied activities such as creating brand value for Thau Laguna oysters and joining Italy’s slow food movement.

After the group became less active, Annie, along with some other women, became involved in awareness-raising around the “Collaborative Spouse Status” provision that French law granted to fisher wives in 1998 in recognition of their equal partnership in the family fishery. And more recently, Annie has also been active in AKTEA, the European network of women’s organizations in fisheries and aquaculture, through which she was able to meet and share experiences with women working in shellfish farming from different countries.

Annie deeply values the friends she has made through AKTEA and her other women’s groups. Without their wonderful solidarity, she may not have been able to continue her work as a shellfish farmer, she says. ▀