

Abagold educates its staff

Article as appeared in the Fish Farmer Magazine, March/April 2010

By Steve McVeigh

ABAGOLD Limited is the first abalone farm in South Africa to participate in a far-reaching adult education programme for their staff. Steve McVeigh spoke with Abagold's training manager, Mynhardt van Dyk, about the programme and its success.



Mynhardt van Dyk, Funeka Sobazile and Sylvester Nyabasa

“With rurally educated people from previously disadvantaged backgrounds looking for employment in South Africa, education levels, skills and language are often barriers to their efficient employment. The company goes out of its way to identify the training needs of its staff, identify a suitable education system and find the right people to apply that system. Abagold is one of three farms situated in the Hermanus abalone farming hub on the south western coast of South Africa. The company produces approximately 240 tonnes of live abalone (*Haliotis Midiae*) a year and is considered to be one of the top performing abalone producers in the country. This high-end product needs expert care and attention through-out its production cycle and it is important that staff understand what is required of them,” explains Van Dyk.

He also says that the agricultural sector's education training authority (Agriseta) national adult basic education and training (ABET) intervention introduced in 2005, has helped Abagold offer employees an educational foundation, making it possible for them to access further skills development opportunities put in place by the company.

Integrated training

According to Johan Hugo, Abagold's financial manager, it is difficult to determine an exact accumulated benefit that this training has had on the company and its staff in their personal capacity over the years. This training has had a noticeable effect on the accuracy of their work, their efficiency and time-management, communication (giving and receiving instructions) and even the improved caring and handling such as basket and tank cleaning, feeding and sorting of the animals on the farm.

Speaking at a certification ceremony, Bertram September of Media Works, adult education specialists contracted by the Agriseta, said: "Despite the intense production conditions of the marine aquaculture industry, Abagold has not seen this as a barrier to training. Rather, the company has integrated training into the daily activities of the farm. Abagold has set the benchmark for ABET training not only in the marine aquaculture industry but definitely on our Agriseta project in general. We are using Abagold as an example of best practice as part of our expansion to abalone farms on the West Coast, because of the consistent success they have managed to achieve."

Van Dyk, who is credited for the training success, continues: "We have proven that ABET can successfully be integrated in any industry, despite the long production hours that characterize some businesses such as this one. My advice to companies considering ABET is to simply do it! Not only does the foundation ABET provides make the introduction of other training easier, but it is also the life-skills and comprehensive effect it has on employees' lives that help us maintain learners' interest and perseverance." In addition to ABET, Abagold also provides job-related training that forms part of individual employees' career paths.

Van Dyk has many years' experience in training people from disadvantaged backgrounds, both in the South African mariculture and iron and steel industries. Training and educating people is his passion, he says. Van Dyk, who has a long list of technical and educational qualifications behind his name, says that abalone farming is a relatively new industry in South Africa but the basic training needs are much the same.

Because of their backgrounds, basic communication, i.e. literacy and numeracy, in English is vitally important, as all signs and production instructions are in English. "If you can't read the instruction, you cannot understand it. If you cannot understand it, you cannot do your job correctly."

Each person is evaluated to determine their educational status, if they need ABET education and, if so, at which level they should start. This assessment is done by Media Works who designed the Agriseta programme and also holds the license. In addition to this, they supply the course books, as well as a pre-determined number of computers for educational training. At present Abagold has 83 staff members in various stages of their ABET training and allows a minimum of 2 hours of ABET training for their staff per person per week on 6 dedicated educational computers.

Since the programme's inception in 2005 the company has issued 148 certificates at various levels of the ABET programme by end of 2009.

Time allowance is made for staff to do a minimum of two hours of ABET training a week, which does not include operational, technical, supervisory, safety and basic life skills training. This is staggered according to the person's work responsibilities and the number of training computers available. All training is initially done as an audio-visual lesson on the computer followed by a visual practical lesson completed in their training manual.

The ABET training programme not only improves education, but also increases employment value in addition to boosting confidence and self-worth, as aspects of responsibility in working and social communities are included in the programme. Developing basic education also afforded the opportunity to look at advancing education in areas such as management of human resources, occupational health and safety, fire fighting, first aid and the like.

Aiding Van Dyk in the education of the staff is Sylvester Nyabasa, a Zimbabwean living in South Africa who taught English as a foreign language in Mozambique after the civil war in the early 1990's. He has a good command of the local language, Xhosa, and is an excellent trainer and peoples' person.



Gurschwon September, Funeka Sobazile and Sithembiso Gwebani