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Dr. Craig Rose, Executive Director of Seaweed Health Foundation

In the algae industry, microalgae has been the main focus of research and funding. However, research is also taking place with macroalgae such as seaweeds. I talked with Dr. Craig Rose, Director of The Seaweed Health Foundation, about seaweeds and their place in the overall algae industry.

1) What benefits do seaweeds have over microalgae?

Seaweeds (macroalgae) are an underutilised natural and sustainable resource with many benefits for a number of industries, including food and healthcare, life sciences, and biofuels. As such, both seaweeds and microalgae have a wide range of benefits for many applications and industries, which have both differing and complementary uses.

Within the food, health and body care industries, the use of seaweeds is long established in Asian cultures, and in the West has traditions in, for example, parts of the UK and Ireland. This is due to the availability and sustainability of seaweeds which are a highly nutritious and tasty source of food.

Furthermore, the huge diversity of seaweed species provides a wide array of benefits with various attributes and applications based on their beneficial micronutrients, proteins, iodine, fatty acids, vitamins, to name put a few.

2) Would seaweed production be a better choice over microalgae for certain climates or areas with land restrictions?

Seaweeds are harvested from the wild, or primarily cultivated at sea for subsequent harvest. As such, there is no requirement for fresh water or competition for land with other crops or natural habitat, which is certainly beneficial in areas where freshwater and land are particularly restricted. Microalgae may require large areas of land as the technology is scaled up, but the land used may well not be of value for human and natural use.

Many aspects of the macro and micro algae industries are already being commercialised and require significant scale-up, so we must keep an open and innovative mind as to how we best cultivate and harvest.

Whatever resources are available to a particular locality for algal cultivation and harvest should be exploited as best suited, and in a commercially viable and sustainable manner.

3) In the growing algae industry, what role do you think seaweeds will play?

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Global investment in algae is growing massively, with the bulk of investment in microalgal biofuels. Seaweeds are also receiving large scale investment, and have a key role for the biofuel potential (e.g. ethanol, methane, butanol), lifescience extracts (e.g. fucoxanthin, laminarin) and for food and health care.

Each of these industries is at varying stages of development, requiring varying levels of investment. Our focus, and the industry that has been established for millennia, is the food and health care industry. As such, the research effort here is to scientifically validate the many beneficial claims of seaweeds, which will enable seaweeds to continue the move towards being more mainstream products accepted and desired by industry and consumers. The research and development of seaweeds is a logical evolution from a relatively low volume: high value industry with seaweeds for food, to the eventual development of high volume: low value biofuel industries. This development fits well with current technological and market readiness.

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