Interviewee Interviewee: Make sure you still have audio?

Interviewer: Yeah. My name is Interviewer, and I am with Ms. Interviewee, who is going to introduce herself formally, and I'm going to put my chair over here. Let's see, they can laugh at this video as they go, wow, this guy was really prepared. And the thing was, I was actually prepared and set up. And [INAUDIBLE] lighting.

Interviewee: Take a look [forward?].

Interviewer: Right. Make sure. I think that'll work. If not, they can just cut me out. I'm going to grab a water real quick, and then we can go ahead and begin. I have a release form for you.

Interviewee: Got to sign the waivers.

Interviewer: Should have you sign with regards to image, and name, and what our plan is to do with this information, and I can give that to you now, or we can do that afterwards.

Interviewee: We can do that after.

Interviewer: OK. Let me turn my phone off.

Interviewee: I better put my phone on silent too.

Interviewer: Let's see.

Interviewee: You can get your steps in today.

Interviewer: Huh? Right. Well, when you start at 4am, it's not hard to hit that mark, is it? As you well know, and we're going to get to find out about here in a second. So first, thank you.

Interviewee: You're welcome.

Interviewer: Not only for agreeing to do the oral history, but for all of your assistance and all of the research that we do here at NOAA. Thank you for helping to bridge, which is a difficult gap sometimes between people who are very leery of the federal government, or governments in general, who say they come in and help, and then they feel like help is not what they get, but they get the opposite.

[00:03:11]

Interviewee: Correct.

Interviewer: And when I started 20 years ago, it was very difficult to talk with these folks, these fishermen, because they were very anxious, and they were very concerned, and they were very on guard. And I got to say that your presence, and probably my 20 years of wearing them down and showing up at some of the most, probably, odd times for them, but to let them know that what you do is so critical in helping for what we do, what I do, be successful. So first, from the bottom of my heart, thank you, and I appreciate it. And second, to say who I appreciate it to, I'd love for you, as a part of this exercise, and feel free to discuss anything that you want. This is not something that's guided by structure or anything like that. This is something for you to tell me about who you are as a person, who you are as a woman, who you are as in relationship to the fisheries, what those roles are? Do they conflict with each other, do they – what does it mean to be a wife, what does it mean to be someone here in St. Thomas, whose life is impacted by the existence of these fisheries, is basically what we would like to know. But we'd like to know it through your story.

Interviewee: Sure. I can do that.

Interviewer: So introduce yourself, and just go ahead and feel free to grab that cup of coffee, and don't go crazy.

Interviewee: Thanks. Well, my name is Interviewee Interviewee, and my whole entire upbringing has been very different from anyone else I know, with the exception of the people that grew up with me. So –

Interviewer: Hold on one second, I want to just double check that I'm recording, because I'd feel like a real dum-dum if I had gotten all this going and didn't record the sound, sorry.

Interviewee: Do you want me to start over?

Interviewer: Better to be safer than sorry.

Interviewee: Yeah, most definitely.

Interviewer: You can just keep on going, they'll edit out the dum-dum part I'm hoping, so.

Interviewee: So I grew up on Hassel Island, which is a key that's in the middle of the harbor. Growing up there, we were cut off from everything, back and forth had to be by a boat. But unlike our neighbor’s water island that were under the federal jurisdiction and also had a lot of government aid, they had a little mini firehouse and things over there. Where I grew up, on Hassel Island, it was just us. So a lot of times, if, let's say, I got home, and I forgot to take out the meat that my mother had put in the freezer, seasoned to make for dinner, I had to find another way to make sure that we had food and I didn't get my ass cut. So I would go fishing, and I would catch fish, I would filet them, I would season them, and that would be our dinner. So I learned how to fish from some –

[00:06:20]

Interviewer: Unbelievable.

Interviewee: What?

Interviewer: Power off phone. Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Interviewee: That's alright. So fishing was really important to us, not only as a food source, but also as a way for me to provide food for some of the other members that were living in our community on Hassel Island. I learned how to fish from some of the pretty old fishers that we had here. So people like Jimmy Loveland, Spike Hebert, they were some of the guys that are big in the charter fishing industry. But then we had people like Armando Jenik, who was originally from the BVI. He also taught me how to fish. So rod and reel, and then a hand line later, was how I got my roots into fishing. And then I've always had a love of the water. Growing up on that little isolated island, your only things to do were either helping the sailmaker make sails, or just spending all your time in the water. So fishing has always been an integral part of my life. But not only that, but my father, his family is from St. John. They moved to the island of Anguilla, and my dad had long liners. So I've got both spectrums of the fishing industry. So I've got the huge, large amount of catch with the long liners, and then I've got the fishing for sustenance from my own existence. And I never thought that I would ever have to involve myself in the managerial side of things. And so from a really young age, I knew that I always wanted to have something to do with marine biology, and that's what I've studied. So I have an Associate's in marine biology. Benthic ecology is my particular field. I want to know about what's going on with a lot of our inshore fisheries. I want to know about our fish stocks. I want to know about how we can keep this fish stock healthy so that the demographic of fishermen we have here can keep making a living out of it. Because when I went to school, I started talking to the fishermen, and then I ended up meeting my husband, who I had no idea was a fisherman, until we got into dating for a little bit, I realized that their idea and their whole feeling of making sure that the oceans stay a part of their lives was also what I wanted to do. You had mentioned earlier that it's pretty difficult dealing with them because they're not very trustful of people that are in government or in agencies that are kind of like regulatory, so with you being from NOAA, that's one thing that makes everybody cautious. But the fishermen that I've dealt with normally every day, laughing, and talking, making jokes, being able to look through their catch, hop on their boats, things like that, once they found out that I was working with the Division of Fish and Wildlife, things started to shift.

[00:09:32]

Interviewer: Really?

Interviewee: Mm-hmm. So now, I was potentially going to be gathering information to take back to these damn scientists, to put another nail in the fishing coffin. So getting them to understand that their voice is important, you can't just complain about them making rules and changes, not talking to them, not involving them in a lot of the scientific studies, which was happening, but not actually make an effort to try to contribute or to get to know who these people are and what they're doing. And then if you see that what their data is, or what they're basing their information on is not entirely correct or helpful, then that's where you come in to help assist them. As a woman, being from the Caribbean, our voices are always heard, so that's one thing. And I had the added, I guess I would say, not really capability, but I had the added advantage of being a fisher. They've seen me driving boats back and forth since I was a little girl, so they know, OK, well, Interviewee actually fishes. She doesn't sit in an air-conditioned office, this woman cleans her own fish, she catches her own fish. They've seen me go and haul fish pots with my husband, so I think that was one of the ways that, some of the fishermen that already knew me, that spoke to the other ones that were kind of like, who the hell is she, and where’d she come from? Like, I don't know who this woman is, she just showed up here all of a sudden at the fish markets. So with them talking to the other fishers, and then them realizing who I am, and the matter of fact too, that my father was also a fisherman, then that's how I got my in amongst the fishing community that were not familiar to me, and I wasn't familiar with them. The main thing that I see happening here with us, is we are not given an opportunity to involve ourselves more with studies concerning our fisheries. Yeah, we have grocery stores here, yes, we have, there's like Walmart, you can get things online and stuff like that. But what it all boils down to, with two big hurricanes that we had, there was Marilyn, we lost a lot of access to our food, a lot of the grocery stores were gone, we had to lean on our fishermen and our home farms to help feed ourselves for a while. Then after Irma, we lost not only a lot of our fishing fleet, like we lost more of our fishing fleet in Irma and Maria than we did with Marilyn, which was devastating. Because now, not only are we missing a lot of fishing boats, but a lot of the fishermen were not able to go out, and they had to consolidate. So the island really found out that they need to have another fallback plan, and the fishermen were it. That did not seem to resonate with the people that do the rules and regulations for our core fishing leaders, and that was a problem. Being on the inside, or being where the managerial parts of it, I didn't realize how much things had to be put in motion in order for things to happen for regulatory, I guess, what is it, regulatory motions to be passed. And the fact that in a lot of those steps, the fishermen were not included from the beginning, really bothered me. It not only bothered me as a person that was in the sciences, but it also bothered me as the wife of a fisherman. It bothered me as a person who loved to fish, and it bothered me as a person who communicated with these fishers every single week. And I –

[00:13:35]

Interviewer: Did it affect your relationship with them? Did they feel somehow you were also a part of the blame in the process, not including them, that they felt like you were government, and did that give them more reason to be less welcoming to you, or did they – you find that your history with them gave you sort of a buffer zone there?

Interviewee: Right, so in the beginning, they lumped me into the same category as all of the scientists and all the regulatory bodies.

Interviewer: Even though they've known you for all other years?

Interviewee: Even though they've known me forever, because the mere fact that I am giving information out on behalf of the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, or the Division of Fish and Wildlife, or I'm in a meeting that is with these two bodies, and Interviewee is the liaison, like I'm the person that needs to move forward. So my actual job is the fisheries liaison between the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, the Fish and Wildlife Division, and our fishermen. So I go to them, I talk to them about what their concerns are, what their troubles are. I talk to them about whether or not they're aware of certain regulatory changes that are coming up, if they know that these meetings are taking place. Then if they don't, I'll tell them, I'll help them set up a Zoom account, I help them set up a link, or how to send their link and take their phones. I put the links in their phone for them, so they can be aware of these things. I had to create a broadcast on their cell phones so that if something happens and there is either a meeting, or a memorandum, or there is a scientific study that's taking place, I send out a broadcast to let them, hey, these people are going to be walking around, please try not to be rude to them, and if they ask you questions that you think they have no business asking, tell them you need to talk with your liaison, or they need to talk with the heads of the district advisory panels. So in the beginning, it was kind of rough. But then afterwards, when they found out that they had free access to information, they could ask me any questions that they wanted, then that was different. So they don't, they no longer are upset with me, or they don't get verbal, verbally abusive, directed at me, but they do get very verbal with me on what their feelings are, depending on the managerial efforts that are taking place. So a good thing would be the queen conch closure, or the potential queen conch closure. So when the queen conch moved into a threatened status, a lot of the fishermen didn't know that this was happening, they didn't know what it meant. And then me putting information out, I just did it because I felt it needed to be done. However, I overstepped by not letting the division know first of all, well, this is what I'm doing, you guys were taking too long, and I just went ahead and released the information anyway. Then I got called to task for not putting the slide through our public media personnel or whatever. So then the fishermen and I were talking about that, and they said, “Well, then why don't you just do it as Interviewee?” And I'm like, yeah, I can just do it as Interviewee. So there's two separate sides that I have to play. Sometimes I have to be Interviewee, the fisheries liaison, and then I also just have to be Interviewee, the fisher-woman who married to [INAUDIBLE] Interviewee and used to go fish pot. And then when I show up at the market, I have to decide which Interviewee is going to be more front and center, because that's the only way that I can get them to open up to me, and to communicate effectively what they feel and what they want done. When the scientists or the researchers come down here to do studies, and they just go into the fish markets without being introduced, I hear about it either that Saturday, or I hear about it, if I see them out in Hull Bay, or I happen to see them at the supermarket, they will approach me and say, “Hey, who are these people that were down here asking us questions?” And if I don't know who these researchers are, that's a problem, because chances are they have not gone through the proper channels, or they got off a plane from the University of, I don't know, like Tampa, or Miami, or Georgia, and just said, hey, let's go do a research on fish migration patterns, and let's talk to the fishermen. You can't, you may be able to do that in other states, or even in Puerto Rico, but you can't do that here in the Virgin Islands. And I realized that a lot of people don't understand that, like, if you don't have someone that you can talk to already here, whether it is myself, or Mr. Julian Lebras, who is the head of our district advisory panel, or if you don't have communication with any of our fishery biologists, these fishers are not going to tell you what you want to hear. Or they're going to tell you what you want to hear, but it may not be the truth. Because our guides, and even I've done it myself, if you want to know where I was fishing yesterday, to bring in this lovely catch, I'm going to tell you where I was fishing, yeah, south east of French town. That's all you're going to get, that's it. If you want to know how many times I go up there, it's like, well, a couple times a year, and then that's it. Because now, we're suspicious, we don't know what you're going to do with this information, we don't know why you're even collecting it. We're not really sure, we haven't had any kind of blueprint beforehand to figure out how this is valuable to you. And then these people will come down here, they'll hand out a flyer, and then the fishermen inevitably will come back to me, and they'll be like, “OK Interviewee, tell us the real story, like what's happening with this?” And from growing up and having to go into Frenchtown, my aunt is married to [INAUDIBLE] on the north side, so spending time between the fishers on the north side, and the fishers out in Frenchtown, if something seems not right, or if something seems like it could potentially be bad for them or their fisheries, they're not going to assist in any way. We had a thing a few years back about the closures of certain areas for federal protected waters, and that was off the coast of St. John. They thought that they were going to be able to utilize areas after a specific amount of years, they were going to close off this one area for a small amount of time, and then they would open it back up for fishing. That never happened. So because of that, I also decided, well, it would be a good idea if I'm on the fishery advisory committee. So all of my positions, all of my interests, all of the committees and the things that I've joined, has been solely and strictly to try to help give the fishermen a voice. Because when I started this job as liaison three and a half years ago, I realized that a lot of information was not getting out to these people.

[00:20:58]

Interviewer: Well, talking about information getting out, we didn't even know you were the fishery liaison. So when did you and I meet each other? About a year or two?

Interviewee: Yeah, I think so.

Interviewer: So for a year and a half, we didn't even know.

Interviewee: Yeah. There is a fishery liaison here.

Interviewer: So, a year and a half, we started our relationship. And one of the things I've known about you is you're passionate about your work. Tell me about your community. Are you passionate about your community? The people here on St. Thomas, they consider themselves a fishing community. They've been designated as such. Do you feel like this is a fishing community?

Interviewee: Fishing and farming. So there are small pockets that are considered fishing communities. So that designation was truly only given to the small town of Carenage, which is locally known as Frenchtown. So Frenchtown is a fishing community, simply because that's what these immigrants from the island of St. Barts had to do to survive. We didn't want them no place else around. Just kept them right down there, close to the water, their own little isolation area. That's where they have belonged. That was not right, because now the people of St. Thomas had to depend on these guys for fresh fish and also fresh meat. The main butcher was down there. The fishermen were down there. And I do have to say though that because Frenchtown was closer to me from Hassel Island, I do feel more at home and I feel more, I don't want to say loyal because that's the wrong word, more connected to the fishermen that are out of Frenchtown. Plus my husband is from there, as opposed to the fishermen that are on the north side. The fishing community status really belongs to only Frenchtown or Carenage. As a whole, the islands, we prefer our food fresh. So we need to have our ground provisions. We have farmers and we have fishers, but St. Thomas has changed so much from a community and an island that is more dependent on our fishers and our farmers, to instant gratification from food grocery stores. Unfortunately, a lot of people would rather go into a supermarket and buy a case of yellowtail for way less than they would be able to go down to the fish market and buy like five pounds of yellowtail snapper instead of going into the grocery store and buying a 10-pound box of yellowtail snapper. I don't like that at all. I've made videos and posts where I'll go to the fishing market, I'll do a Facebook video reel of the fisherman, and I'll say something like, “Fresh is best. Leave other people thing alone and support your own kind,” of stuff. And I'm also hurt, I take it personally when I feel like the fishing community is slighted. We have different decrees that are given out all the time. We have different people that are recognized all the time in our government, we even had a food and farm development that was taking place, and the fishermen to me seemed like they were an afterthought. It was like, oh yeah, food and farm. Oh wait, fishermen are also food, right? So let's include them as well. And I hate that, that really irritates me. And so I try to make sure that the community remembers that you're doing yourself a favor if you go and buy fresh fish. It's just – and the guys, they see me struggling. They know that it's tough. Some of them will sort of help me out when it comes to different things that are maybe a little controversial. So I'll tell them what's happening. I'll show them pictures, I'll have open discussions with them, and then they in turn will talk to other fishermen about it. Like, “Listen, you need to give Interviewee a chance. Hear what she's saying. If you have a different idea, then just tell her. Don't keep it to yourself. Don't tell anybody else. Tell Interviewee so she can take it and try to get them to fix this mess.” And that's what's been happening. I just recently started getting assistance from a really strong fisherperson in the Virgin Islands or on St. Thomas. That was a key thing because a lot of these fishermen are also gatekeepers to certain information, and if you don't get their OK, then some of the fishermen that you want to talk to or get their opinion about things on, they will not talk to you because this person said, “That's not a good idea.” So it's a tight knit community.

[00:26:04]

Interviewer: Information is very guarded.

Interviewee: Yeah. It is.

Interviewer: It's as valuable as money, isn't it?

Interviewee: Pretty much. And sometimes all it takes is money to get information from a lot of these guys. And that is, they feel like if you are going to ask them questions and you are going to take time out of their day, then they're going to want some kind of compensation for it. A lot of times we can have public meetings, and I feel that might be – what I've learned and what I've seen in my years in this position is if you have a public meeting and you tell the fishermen, look, we need you all to come and meet at this place, this and this a time, you make sure that it is a time where most of them are agreeable to, it's not cutting into their fishing time. It's not cutting into their family time. If it's a meeting where they can bring their spouses and have their spouses be with the children, if they’re younger kids and then the fishermen can communicate as well, then that's great. But if you have your own set time and your own set place, and it's not conducive to the fishermen being able to attend properly, then they're not going to go, first of all, they're not going to respond. And then also they're going to feel like you don't value their time either, but yet you want information from them. So we –

Interviewer: It seems like a lot of the problems with communication can be solved with appropriate planning, and a proper level of respect in the planning process to make sure that they're not just told that this is happening, but “Hey, can we do this?” Are there times which are best for you? And we'll try to work as much as we can to – because we have limitations too as you well know. We have limitations too, but the key is to try to make it, the process as easy as possible so that we can create that partnership.

Interviewee: Correct. And just for the record, a lot of these fishers need to know about something that may potentially be taking place two months out.

Interviewer: Right. It can't be something that comes a week beforehand.

Interviewee: It can't be something that comes a month beforehand. So, two to three months out seems to be like the best planning time for these guys. And then also planning it around certain times of the year as opposed to others. So, March and April seem to be really good times because that's slow fishing because the fish are going out, they're spawning, they're doing other things, they're not potting as well as they can. And then also hurricane season, so September, October kind of tricky for us because you never know when the weather's going to change. You never know when there's a hurricane coming and they're going to have so many other things to concentrate on. If there's a hurricane that enters our islands anytime in September and from when it gets past, like Antigua and Willa, we're going to be watching it because we don't know if that's coming up to us. So September and October are kind of bad months to have anything planned for us. Then also, doing things in the middle of the month. So, May and June are kind of tough for the fishermen also to get themselves together. August seems to be really good. And March and April seem to be really good. I had no idea until I started doing this job.

[00:29:38]

Interviewer: Yeah, but that's really good information to share and know, and I appreciate you sharing that. I feel like I'm here and I know the personal side of Interviewee as a manager, as a fisheries person, and this and that. Tell me your favorite story about fishing. Tell me the thing that makes you smile. Tell me the thing that you remember, maybe it was when you were a little girl or? But what is your favorite fishing story or thought?

Interviewee: So I have two of them. The first barracuda that I ever caught, I was fishing around the rocks on the back of Hassel Island, this place that we call Hassel Beach. [Jimmy Lovelin?] had given me this really short, really cool rod, and I had no idea that the rod was a valuable rod. And so I took it out and I was casting for it. I was catching little sergeant majors and stuff and cutting them up and just impaling them on the hook and tossing it out. And so, I hooked this really big, huge silver fish, and I was dragging it in. I was fighting it and everything, and the fish was gorgeous. It had these beautiful teeth, all these lovely black spots on it. And I went to go run up to go grab the fish and take a rock and knock it out and then bring it home to go eat. As I'm running over to go take the fish, this guy, we call him crazy Carl, comes out of nowhere, scoops me up, puts me down, and is like, “Interviewee, you can't touch that. What are you doing?” I'm like, “I want to eat it.” And he's like, “No, no, no, we can't eat these. You're not supposed to eat these. These are bad fish.” And I'm like, “But it's silver like a king fish or a mackerel, no?” And crazy Carl was like, “No, baby, you can't eat these fish at all. It's not a good idea.” So he was going to throw the fish back into the water, but I was fighting him tooth and nail. I hit the fish, now it's dead. And he threw it into the water and he wanted me to go home. Well, I waited until he left, and I went back into the water and I got my fish and I brought it home and I cleaned it. And when my mom saw it, she was like, “Interviewee, you caught this all by yourself?” And I said, “Yeah, I did. I caught it all by myself. I caught it on the rod.” And then, we cooked it up, it was delicious, amazing. And that had to be like - and then when I told Jimmy about it, he's like, “You caught your first sport fish. Good for you.” But the pride and the joy and just the independence I felt from bringing in that huge barracuda. OK, in retrospect, that fish was like maybe only a foot and a half long, but to me it was gigantic.

[00:32:43]

Interviewer: But still, to you it was 10 feet [long?].

Interviewee: It was gigantic. From then on, I'm like, this is it. I'm going to be a fisher person. I am going to be able to feed other people. I'm going to get on a boat. I'm going to do all these kind of things. And that was my glory thing right there like, oh, this big barracuda stuff. So then I was telling the story of my kids and my husband, and then Robert was like, “So one time my father and I were hauling fish pots” – and this is got to be my favorite fishing story – and he said, “We were out in the boat,” and they hauled in a couple of fish pots, and there was a shark that was in the fish pot. “And so we had to try and poke the shark out. My father had to rip the paddle to get a shark to drop out. Shark was swimming all over the boat and stuff.” I’m thinking, like, that's not true. That sharks don't end up in fish pots, that's impossible. Until we went out with my husband on a fishing boat, we were raising traps. He brought a fish pot in and he's like, “Interviewee, come look at this.” And I look over the side and there is this huge reef shark that is following the fish pot up to the boat. So my job was to reach over, grab the fish pot on the winch, haul it into the boat, and as the reef shark is coming up to hit the fish pot, and I'm, like, swinging it into the boat, I realize the fish pot has a nurse shark inside of it.

Interviewer: Oh, right. That is why. And I'm not trying to be inappropriate by going to my phone right now, but I wanted to show you something that – the first time I ever went out on a boat was with [Nikki?] and Garrison Martinez –

Interviewee: Over in St. Croix?

Interviewer: In St. Croix. I took a picture of it, and I sent it to Laura. When I was meeting all the guys again at the [INAUDIBLE] I was like, oh my God, I'm seeing all these faces of people I knew 20 years ago and this and that. I'm like, so happy to see you. I'm, like, I have photos for you guys to see from when we were there. And hold on. Where is it?

Interviewee: From all those years ago?

Interviewer: All those years ago, I had them. Where is it? Please Lord, let it be there. It has to be there.

Interviewee: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah, right there, out of the fish pot.

Interviewee: What! Look at you.

Interviewer: So you're telling me a story about a nurse shark in a fish pot.

Interviewee: Yeah. The fish pot.

Interviewer: There’s the nurse shark, there’s your proof.

Interviewee: That's it.

Interviewer: Nurse shark in a fish pot.

Interviewee: That’s crazy, I’m like, “Sharks don't go into fish pots.”

Interviewer: That's what I thought too.

Interviewee: That’s not true.

Interviewer: That's why I took the picture, because I was like, I've never seen a shark [in my life?] I’ve heard of breaking fish pots –

Interviewee: [CROSSTALK] Yeah, but not [inaudible] get inside of them.

Interviewer: I've never heard them going inside the funnel and getting stuck inside the block.

[00:35:46]

Interviewee: Yeah, I would never think a shark would be able to fit, but apparently, they can. And that's not a small shark.

Interviewer: It's not a little nurse shark. And that wasn't a giant fish pot either.

Interviewee: Yep. So that's it. Now, however, I cannot smell a barracuda in a boat at all.

Interviewer: Isn't it funny?

Interviewee: I get instantly sick. So something has changed between when I was a little girl growing up in Hassel Island. And now, because if we're going out in a fishing tournament, or even if Robert and I are trolling and we land a barracuda –

Interviewer: It’s stinking, cut it and go. But the thing is in Barbados, it's like one of our favorite food fish to eat. But you got to have already had it cleaned, seasoned and in the steam pot before I'll eat it because I get to the point where I don't even want to shoot them and put them on my stringer because it has somehow has that stink that I don't remember when I was younger.

Interviewee: Me either. It seems to me like now it seems like they smell heavily of awful copper, just to-

Interviewer: Right, like a metal, some sort of metal.

Interviewee: Yeah. They don't smell good.

Interviewer: It's not a pleasant, and we get – because we get some nice small sized ones, 20-inch, 18-inch, a nice good eating size, pop head, make them in a couple little pieces and they're really delicious. But we're handle them, they just stink.

Interviewee: They do, they didn't back that. They [put up a great fight?]

Interviewer: I don't remember them [INAUDIBLE]. Yeah, they put a wonderful [fight?]

Interviewee: Yeah. But no, now I can't do that. But those are like my two favorite –

Interviewer: Well, thank you for sharing those stories with me.

Interviewee: You’re welcome.

Interviewer: Now I want you to share a story with me about the relationship between fishermen and hurricanes and post hurricanes.

Interviewee: So does that kind of involves more –

Interviewer: Not just the destruction of their gear, but does the island turn to fishermen?

Interviewee: This is kind of in correlation to community as well. So before I tell you anything about that, what I want to say is, I feel like not only our territorial government, but our federal government do not recognize the plight of fishermen as they should. I understand that they might do it for their stateside contingents or whatever, but when it comes to us here in the territories, I really do not feel like we get enough assistance, nor do I feel like we get enough notice or we get enough attention. We had two really bad things happen. So the first thing, with hurricanes we understood, because way back from like Hugo, fishermen lose their trap. Something happens, you just suck it up. You go on and do the best you can. You cannot catch yourself for years and years and years to come. But then with Marilyn, we realized that there's not really any help for us whatsoever. So, it was asked that funding be put aside to have some monies available to assist fishermen. And then I think there was something that was created called the Fishermen Fund, or there was some sort of funding, I need to check my records, that was supposed to be there to help aid the fishermen that never came to fruition. So I don't know what happened with that. Then we had Irma and Maria, and then we had people fighting and struggling to get federal grant money, which none of us knew was available for the territories as well, because no one was actively seeking these grants to come and assist us. And then COVID. So we're hearing about things happening in the states, we're hearing about all of these different things you can get assistance from, and it's all federal. Yes, I understand, I get that we are a territory, but I feel, and speaking to the fishermen, we all feel like there should be some sort of funding either put aside or allocated specifically for not only natural disasters like hurricanes, but also these health disasters as well like we did with COVID. If you are going to make it so that people are not allowed to go outside, they cannot gather, people cannot be in one area, whether it's open air or not, and then you're cutting into an industry that relies on having people in close proximity, it relies on people being able to see and touch their product because culturally what they were doing was, they were making us go outside of our normal behavior. And if I can't go to the fish market to see my fishermen, to touch fish because somebody's not supposed to be within a four feet or whatever next to me, and there's a whole bunch of us crowding around and you have an enforcement officer coming down and saying, “Well, we're going to have to shut you down if these people don't disperse,” that wasn't right. Culturally, for us, that was really difficult, and we didn't like it. So there was a lot of pushback, not only from the people but also from the fishers. We feel like we do not get proper notification and training on how to apply for these kind of fundings. Now there are different opportunities that are available for funding for the fishermen and for the fisheries, but I feel like we don't have areas where the fishers can go and take lessons on how to apply for these things. We don't have spaces set up or infrastructures where if we want to know exactly what a certain branch is about, we can go into an office and say, “Hey, is there information that you can give me on this federal grant or whatnot?” There were grants that had come through that I went to different fishers and said, “Hey, there's this meeting, this is taking place, would you like me to help you apply for this federal grant?” And then the information that they ask the fishers for is really personal to them, and the fishermen don't understand why they need to give up this information. What's going to happen to this information? And then like, is this going to have any reflection territorially, is the government going to be in control of this money to do with what they want, or is this funding going to come directly to the fishermen from the federal source? Which they would prefer a whole lot better than to have it go through the territorial coffers.

Interviewer: Government, right.

Interviewee: Yeah, exactly. So then, it's a disservice, I feel, not only to our fishing community, but also to the island community as a whole, because if we have these natural disasters, the fishermen have already lost their boats. OK, granted some fishermen have other means to fall back on. They have businesses that they do that are outside of fishing, they have rental units, they have houses that they have apartments on that they can rent out. But then you have fishermen that don't have that opportunity. They have their fishing, they have their boat, and they have their fishing, that's all they do. So if there's a natural disaster that takes place and they lose their boat, or they lose the ability to go out, and when they catch fish, sell to large groups of people, that is a huge disadvantage to them. It's a disadvantage to their families. It will also start affecting their core group of buyers, because if you don't have your boat, and you can't fish, some other fisherman that was fortunate enough to keep their boat, they are able to bring in fish. These people are now not going to come buy with you, because now they have a new person that they can consistently buy from. Then you have to recreate a whole new customer base on top of the trying to get back the customers that you had from before. So every time there's a natural disaster, the fishing industry is put back just a little bit further. A lot of these guys still have not recovered from Irma, and that was in 2017. So they're still trying to catch themselves, they haven't gotten back to the capacity that they were in, in 2016 or early 2017. And one of the reasons is, is that funding was not readily available to us for that. And then immediately after that, we had COVID, which put a dent in the overall collaborative sales, because the hotels were closed, we didn't have visitors coming down.

Interviewer: No cruise ships.

Interviewee: Yeah, no cruise ships. Well, cruise ship people don't really matter that much, because they don't dine out as much as the hotel people and the on-island visitors do, but with that being closed and hotels, the local people lost a lot of their jobs. They weren't able to make a lot of money. And so at that point, fish became a luxury. So what are you going to do, go to the store and buy chicken for cheaper, or are you going to go to the market and buy fish? You want to save money so you're not going to buy as much fish, you're probably going to go and buy chicken, whatever. So the only thing that increased for the fishermen during COVID, was the fact that a lot of people didn't want to go to the grocery stores. So they went to the fishermen, and they bought fish instead of having to stand in line and, at six foot spacing and stuff, because we just, we don't want to do that. But the natural disasters and medical instances like that are just, it's really harmful to the fishing community.

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Interviewer: Do you plan every year regardless of knowing how bad a year is going to be? Do you have some sort of preparation, or do people on the island have some sort of preparation for the hurricane season, saying, “OK, I need to do this or do that, or?”

Interviewee: So here's a problem too, and this is going straight back to territorial. Can we get federal assistance for this? I don't know, I haven't found it yet in all of our NOAA information. However, so during hurricane time, hurricane prep is really important. Every fisherman knows where their boat's going to go, what they're going to do if a storm is coming. We are allowed to tie up to the mangroves in case there's a storm coming in, because, as everyone knows mangroves have calmer waters, they're shallower, there's protection from the mangroves themselves. However, a lot of our hurricane preparedness space, or space to put our boats, has been taken away because the boats have not been taken away since 2017.

Interviewer: So they're still having the same [derelict?] boats.

Interviewee: So the damn, they're still there in the mangroves, in the hurricane protected areas, and they had needed to move, and we keep on hearing there is no funding to move these boats. So now we're putting another fleet of fishing vessels at risk because they either, A, didn't listen to what the fishermen were saying, or B, didn't try to find a way to source funding for it, or another thing is, the territory just really can’t handle that right now. And this is the kind of disrespect that fishermen get, and they see it, and this is why they are so reluctant to help out. Because if somebody says, oh, we're coming here and this is for the benefit of you, and every time they say, OK, well, we're going to trust now and see what happens, they end up getting bitten, or they end up being told something that the government cannot deliver. And so now we're in hurricane season again, we just had Beryl do her thing through the Grenadines and Barbados. And so our guys here are like, well, these damn boats are still here, there's hurricane season coming up, what's going to happen to us if we get hit with another hurricane? And that concerns all of them, because now they had to try, from last year, to find other places where they're going to put their boat. We also have to be concerned about, is it going to be that Parks and Recreation one year is going to decide we can't put our boats in the ball field in Frenchtown? We do not have a designated area on land for these guys to haul their trailers in that's protected. I've been to places in Florida, I've been to places in Georgia, and I've seen that there are haul out places for these guys that have stakes in the ground, for them to put their trailers and boats on. Like, how hard could that be for us to do that on the Virgin Islands? The fishing fleet is always going to be there to help provide with food after a natural disaster, grocery stores could get blown away, fish don't get blown out to the water, you know. And so I'm getting a little emotional right now about this, but simply because, we've had so many chances to change the way that the territory handles these situations, and it hasn't improved. And then after Irma, and then seeing all these fishing vessels gone, and lost, and destroyed, like walking into the ball field and seeing boats tipped overs, knocked apart, seeing sailboats crashed into other fishermen boats, and things like that, and knowing that those guys don't have rentals, they don't have apartments, they don't have generational money, how they going to catch themselves? Down in Frenchtown, I'm like – OK, so one of the things that my husband was really thankful for was that he ended up getting a government job. Because he was like, “Interviewee, if we still had kids in school, both of us would have to be working three jobs.” Because a lot of – that’s all they have is their fishing and their fishing business, and you mean to say, the hell, we can't even create a space where these guys can haul out and put their boats? It's been decades, we know the Virgin Islands has all these hurricanes, and you are not only putting food stability at risk by not helping these fishermen, but you're also going to disservice a whole demographic, because up until maybe COVID, they weren't considered that valuable? It's just, I don't know, anyway, I hope that answers your question about community and hurricanes and natural disasters.

[00:50:13]

Interviewer: It does. And it provides a great example of the difficulties that exist in recovery, in opportunity, like you talked about, the zero program that one can apply for to come and remove derelict. Because those boats have got to have a negative impact on the mangroves, don't they? I would think, apart from an ecological standpoint.

Interviewee: Yeah, they do.

Interviewer: So one would think that that would be another concern. And from a fishery nursery area standpoint, that if you've got boats that are leaking stuff, or have metals or whatever, these things would be real considerations. I appreciate you sharing those perspectives with us.

Interviewee: Thanks.

Interviewer: So, it's nice. It's nice to hear. I love people that have to balance both sides of the aisle, because oftentimes they're the ones that have the most conflict. Because they've got to figure out how to sit across the table, and at the same point in time, how to go and sit across a desk, or a workshop on these things. And it's interesting to watch the balance that it takes.

Interviewee: Yeah, it's tough because a lot of times I'm told things like, “Well, Interviewee, there's no funding available for that within the territory, because that was not something that was in consideration when blah blah blah,” I'm like, the Coastal Zone Management is supposed to have funding available for this specific reason. Hurricanes aren't something brand new, this has been happening forever. Derelict boats, cars, you can move the cars really easy. You've got funding to take all of these old, abandoned cars off of the roads and put them someplace else, that's great. Why don't you have that same thing for boats that are in our estuaries, that are in our protected areas, our reserves, and you can't move these boats from there? But yet you're telling the fishermen, oh, well, if you guys can't all fit in the ball field, well, may the odds be ever in your favor. I don't understand. And then, like I asked, well, how can we apply to get funding for this? Oh, it takes a really long time, it's a lot of paperwork, we need to make sure that we have the proper material so that they can see what our need is. Really? We have to do all of that just to get like 20 boats moved out of the mangroves? We have to show that there's a need for it? And you guys aren't having this study done. So we don't have territorial money to get this stuff out of our water, we need to try to find a way to get federal money to get the stuff out of our water, but we need to prove to the Feds that we actually need this money? No, that's wrong. And then I got to go tell the fishermen like, “Hey Interviewee, they going to do anything about our boats?” “I have no idea.” “So what have you been doing this whole entire time? We [are telling you?] all of these boats need to be moved?” “You did, however, they did state that this should be a grassroots organization, and you all need to gather your forces and sit in on a legislative communication about something that's going on from [CCM?], to let them hear your needs.” They don't have time for that. As far as they're concerned, it should be really easy. Move the damn boats out of the mangroves, so they have a place to put their boats when there's a hurricane. Collect fees. You've got so much money sitting there, and if you can't find the owners of these abandoned boats, then trash them, and that's on you for not doing your job, for protecting these reserves. So yeah, it's been a rough three years. It's been really, really rough, but it has brought me closer to the plight of the fisherman, and how they are treated, and also how they view the government, and why they feel the way they do about a lot of federal and territorial regulations.

[00:54:37]

Interviewer: Well, thank you for sharing all this with us.

Interviewee: You're welcome.

Interviewer: I appreciate it. And you never got any time, chance to drink your coffee?

Interviewee: I did not, I hope it's not too cold.

Interviewer: I'm sure it is now. Let me see this –

Interviewee: Maybe you should have asked me that hard stuff at the beginning.

Interviewer: Oh yeah?

Interviewee: Then it'd have been nice and calm afterwards. Oh God, now I'm irritated.

Interviewer: Well, then don't drink the coffee, go drink a rum.