Key Informant Interview 12

Date: 8/4/16

Occupation/Affiliation: Commercial Fisher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field: Since the 1980s

Community/Area/Location: Punta Pozuelo (Guayama)

Speaker 1. Describe your involvement with Puerto Rican fisheries.

Speaker 2. [...] Informant said they had been a commercial fisher all their life. They also mentioned they lived in the US [for decades] and that they decided to go back to PR to go into fishing again. [...]

Speaker 1. In general, how would you rate Puerto Rico coastal communities’ dependency on fisheries for their livelihood?

Speaker 2. Somewhat Dependent

Speaker 1. Describe (e.g. In what ways? Why do you think that is?).

Speaker 2. Informant said it depends on the community. They said that coastal communities depend considerably on fishing but the mountain range communities do not. Informant said that *pescaderías* and some *barrios* do depend on fishing but the majority of people depend on tourism – which they said “are the same thing.”

Speaker 1. In general, how would you rate Puerto Rico coastal communities’ dependency on coral reefs for their livelihood?

Speaker 1.Describe (e.g. In what ways? Why do you think that is?).

Speaker 1. What would you say is(are) the major problem(s) facing fishing communities in Puerto Rico? (If more than one please rank them in order of importance).

Speaker 2. Informant said: “we are disowned by the Department of Agriculture. They do not help the fishermen.” Informant said the fishermen do not benefit directly from their actions and that the government poses too many obstacles. There are so many regulations and impediments to the development of the PR fishing industry. The fishing is very artisanal because there are no incentives from the government.

Informant said the government destabilizes the communities and creates conflicts among the fishermen.

Informant said that DNER and Department of Agriculture get federal money to be allocated for local fisheries development and they use money for other things and not to help the fishermen. They mentioned that about 12 years ago there was a fund for PR fisheries (according to informant it totaled $16 million) and they said that this fund disappeared and the fishermen never saw a cent.

Informant mentioned that in order to be able to obtain a license to be considered a commercial fisherman and be able to benefit from some of the programs available you need to be a full-time and bonafide fisherman and so it becomes difficult to reach that status. They said that even for licensed commercial fishermen the benefits are not good – they mentioned that there is no help to buy or fix equipment and that you have to pay out of your own pocket and maybe get a 50% reimbursement.

Informant said that the Department of Agriculture is transferring the land that has been traditionally used by the fishermen to the municipalities and the municipalities are not working in favor of the fishermen.

Informant mentioned that they put restrictions on the use of the *villa pesquera* space – for example the fishermen wanted to have a pleasure boat stationed at the *villa* to take some tourists out on the weekend and make some extra money to maintain the place but they are not allowed to do that. Informant said that the government says they need to be self- sufficient but they don’t allow or help them get on their feet. Informant said the fishermen make sacrifices to be able to buy equipment and the farmers get equipment aid.

Informant said the problem is that everything is too politicized. The arguments are too politicized; DNER and Department of Agriculture are politicized. Infromant said these agencies do what is convenient for them and they do not serve the people. Informant said: “we cannot work this way.”

Informant said the fishermen make sacrifices to continue to fish. The money they make is not enough to maintain the *villa*. They said they have no money to buy boats for the fishermen. They have been asking for money to invest in boats for some Pozuelo fishermen and they were not granted any money (they asked for a few boats and they didn’t even get 1). Informant mentioned that some fishermen started a new coop nearby and that they were given 5 boats by the Department of Agriculture – they said these boats were destroyed/abandoned and that the coop didn’t survived. The *villa* doesn’t get any assistance to buy new boats.

Informant said there are half as many fishermen in PR than there are farmers but the farmers get assistance from the government but the fishermen do not. The fishermen pay for licenses and permits and they pay to register their boats every year ($5 for the main boat and $25 for the others) but they do not see any of this money being used to improve the lives of the fishermen. Informant said that the government always says there is no money to help the fishermen. Informant said that the recreational fishermen get more benefits than the commercial.

Informant said the government does not understand that the fishermen are very important for the country – the same way farmers are – because if something happens to the country (economically or militarily) we are the ones who can help – we have access to the land and coasts, we are invested in the country.

Informant mentioned multiple times that this is a difficult issue and a painful one. Informant has been very public about their feelings toward these problems – given multiple interviews to the media. Informant is very involved politically in the fight for the fishermen.

Informant said that the mayor has helped the association before because informant knows him personally but no serious help with maintenance costs for example just smaller things. Informant said they pay water and electricity themselves.

Informant said these issues anger the fishermen because they get no assistance, no help. There are currently 25 fishermen in the Pozuelo *villa pesquera*.

Informant has also taken part on the Comité Multisectorial del Gasoducto (Pipeline Multisector Committee) discussing the implementation of a pipeline cutting through 6 municipalities in the southern part of the island from Peñuelas to Salinas municipality. Informant said was very upset because there were indications that members of the committee didn’t see the point in having somebody from the Guayama area in the committee since the pipeline is not going through that municipality and therefore that would not affect the population or the fishermen in that area. Informant said was offended by that they think that anything that affects the region and PR in general affects them directly. Informant said was there defending the rights of PR fishermen.

Informant said that the number of *pescaderías*  in PR went from about 80 to about 44 and that is a result of the Department of Agriculture transferring land to the municipalities and the municipalities not working in the interest of the fishermen. Informant said that is a very serious problem because it puts many obstacles for the fishermen.

Informant said they had to fight in court to be able to keep and maintain the *villa pesquera.* Informant said the poor people in this country get no help only the rich.

Speaker 1. Have you observed any changes to the fishery, environment, or other natural resources in Puerto Rico that you think can be attributed to climate change? Describe.

Speaker 2. Informant said that climate change is not a problem. Informant said that the fishery in PR varies a lot from season to season. They said that the big companies affect the fishery and so the fish is decreasing because they are scared away from warm water discharge and pollution from big companies along the coast. They said they can still fish but not as much as they used to.

Speaker 1. In your opinion, are Puerto Rican fishers concerned about climate change? Why or why not?

Speaker 2. Informant said climate change is not what is affecting the fish. Informant said the big companies, the industry is what is causing the fish to go away from PR waters. Informant said if the fish is not happy here that they will move somewhere else. Informant said the companies are affecting people’s health – mentioned more cases of cancer, heart disease as a consequence of pollution – and so “imagine what it does to the fish?”

Speaker 1. In your opinion, are Puerto Rico fishery manager/decision-makers/researchers concerned about climate change? Why or why not?

Speaker 2. “they blame climate change but it is not, it is the industries, the pollution.” Informant said that fishing is bad because of the industries and the fishermen try to get the attention of the government about that but they don’t do anything besides blame the fishermen for overfishing. Informant said fishermen are a species on the verge of extinction because of the government. Informant said the government is not interested in the local fisheries, they import the fish and the outsiders make money while the PR fishermen make very little.

Speaker 1. Do you think people in this community can work together to solve community problems? Why or why not?

Informant said people should be able to get together and work together, negotiate because we are all human beings but people get divided. In PR, we are very divided. Informant said that they had seen a great deal of inequality, racism, and envy in PR culture. Informant said that the island is incapable of administering itself, and they have a bad government that favors the rich and cuts the electricity of the poor. Informant said he is proud of being from PR and that they have produced a lot of good people (athletes, and people in important government positions in Washington) but that it is painful that they cannot manage their country. Informant said that their politics is an embarrassment and that all they care about is votes and they do nothing to help the people especially the poor. Informant said they have hope that it can change, said it has to change.

Speaker 1. Do you think fishers could work together to solve problems in the fishery? Why or why not?

Speaker 2. Yes. They have always worked together.

Speaker 1. Can you think of any examples of this kind of community action occurring now in Puerto Rican fisheries? Describe.

Speaker 2. For the past 15 years they have been organizing to protest when there are problems.

Speaker 1. Do you think the government and fishers could work together to solve problems in the fishery? Why or why not?

Speaker 2. Informant said they have been working along and meeting with government officials to complain about some of these issues but that it is very difficult and frustrating to work with the government: “they open one door and close another.”

Speaker 1. Can you think of any examples of this kind of participatory action occurring now in Puerto Rican fisheries? Describe.

1. Informant has been fighting over Lei 278 for over 4 year going to San Juan frequently to meetings and he said the government doesn’t do anything. Informant once heard the *sub-secretário* using a bad word to refer to the fishermen – as if they were a “pain.”

Speaker 1. Do you feel that fishery management in Puerto Rico is fair in the decisions they make? Why or why not? Be specific.

Speaker 2. Informant said that farmers get a great deal of assistance from the government (subsidies, aid to buy equipment, etc) but that the fishermen do not get any assistance and in fact the government poses a number of different obstacles to the development of the fishery in PR.

Informant said the government tends to favor the tourism industry and used the example of the Bahia House Resort in the Bay of Guayama and how they got permission to clear an area of mangrove to build a pier and how they are impacting the coast but the officials are keeping quiet about it because they benefit from it. Informant said that is an example of inequality in PR because the decisions favor the big interest and never the fishermen.

Informant also said that the government does not pay attention to the proposals written by the fishermen to improve and develop the fisheries in PR – they say they do not have the time to read them.

Speaker 1. Do you think most fishers understand how managers make decisions? Why or why not?

Speaker 1. In general how would you describe the relationship between fishers and fishery managers/decision-makers?

Speaker 2. Informant said that fishermen from different areas have differences of opinion and that sometimes these differences weaken the argument for the fishing communities as a whole. Especially because informant thinks the government wants to break up the cohesion among the fishermen.

Informant also said that when the NOAA people come to ask information from the fishermen – about the catch and the resources – the fishermen are not willing to collaborate and give them information because they do not trust them and because they never help the fishermen. Informant said the fishermen are happy to talk to people and help for as long as they are willing to also help and not hurt them and said if “you don’t help us we won’t help you.”

Speaker 1. If they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and between fishers and managers/decision-makers resolved?

1. Informant said they would like for fisheries to stay outside of politics.