Key Informant Interview 14

Date: 7/20/2016

Stakeholder Group: Government

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field: 26 years

Community/Area/Location: SanJuan/Río Piedras

Speaker 1. Describe your involvement with Puerto Rican fisheries.

[...] For the past 26 years [...] has had a great deal of involvement in PR fisheries. Has both a masters and a PhD in fisheries studies. When first [began working at current capacity] the fishing regulations that were still in practice had been implemented in 1936 and, therefore, were very rudimentary and outdated. Informant was part of the first group created to propose changes to fishery regulations in PR (both commercial and recreational sectors) beginning in 1998. In 2004 they passed the first semi-modern fishery regulations which were updated in 2010 [...]

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

Speaker 2. I don’t know

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

Speaker 2. “This is where we need your help.” There is very little data on fishermen’s dependency on fish resources and we need good objective studies that will provide solid information on this. A lot of the studies and the information that is produced (mentioned SeaGrant studies) are not objective and do not reflect the reality (“these studies raise my blood pressure”). We need to base our decisions on reality and therefore we need good data on this.

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

1. Not sure

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

Speaker 2. The data that we have shows that commercial fishermen are more dependent on coral reef species than recreational fishermen who depend mostly on pelagic species. The fisheries experienced a peak in the 1970s and overfishing has been happening for a few decades. As a consequence he believes that the value of the fish has dropped considerably which probably affects people’s dependency. In the past, fewer fishers were able to get a higher value for the fish and probably depended more heavily on the resources.

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 mentioned the following (not raked in terms of importance): Overfishing – significant decline and potential loss of species (including coral reef dependent species); Overexploitation of sea cucumbers; Poaching (illegal fishing); No clear definition of commercial v. recreational, “blending of licenses”; Low compliance levels on the part of the fishermen; Insufficient enforcement (“law enforcement is incompetent”); Little NGO presence (PEW is currently trying to establish a presence but is more focused on economic aspects; Pesca Playa & Ambiente is one of the few NGOs present, they spread conservation measures and information but they are mostly for a recreational audience). Informant mentioned again the need for external help to address some of these issues.

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 mention they would be “guessing here” due to lack of data. Some of the most definite effects are direct effects on coral reefs causing bleaching events; Influx of Sargasso in certain areas which affects boat traffic and gear and also releases hydrogen sulfide when rotting which can be deadly to marine life. Other impacts they mentioned were impacts to coastal communities regarding sea level rise and storms – something about storm water discharges that do not work well and discharge untreated sewage underwater. Informant also mentioned that they do not have data at the moment to monitor changes in fish migration or other effects on marine life due to the lack of sophisticated methods for measuring such changes. Informant stated that Puerto Rico scientists are still trying to figure out the species of fish that are in Puerto Rico let along the sophisticated detail on the movement of fish.

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

Speaker 2. “This is a good question.” Some feel changing times of spawning aggregations are changing. There have been some changes to queen conch regulations associated with changes on spawning behavior – changes that were perceived by the fishermen. In general informant does not get any word from fishermen directly regarding concerns about climate change - mentioned they are more concerned about the regulations.

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

Speaker 2. “Quite a bit.” But we need more information.

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

1. Informant didn’t really answer this question – talked specifically about the fishing community (below).

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

Speaker 2. “Good luck.” Fishermen are lone wolves and they are infamous for not working together. They are keen on their independence, being their own boss, working alone is one of the reasons they get into the occupation to begin with.

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

Speaker 2. No examples mentioned.

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 provided an explanation of the regulation process to answer this question. Informant said that the fishermen were not used to being regulated (“they were completely unregulated for forever”) and the groups that initially got together to propose the first fishing regulations involved the fishermen, got input from fishing groups, from SeaGrant, did public hearing to discuss the process (“an intense process”). There was no intent to favor one group versus another. The intention was to recover fish populations. The DNER created a fisheries group heavily weighted toward commercial fishing to go over the regulations and discuss them with the fishermen and to do education efforts.

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

Speaker 2. The best scenario in the informant’s opinion is to have an NGO or a consultant (an outsider) working with the fishermen and not someone from inside the regulatory agency. Informant is afraid that a government official could become “too friendly” with the people they are regulating, a phenomena they called “regulatory capture.” “I’ve seen it happen.”

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. The goal is to restore fish populations and in order to do that we can’t afford to focus on fishermen’s incomes. We have to reduce effort.

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

Speaker 2. Informant stated the fishermen tell you their concerns. Managers explain to fishermen their concerns and try to provide education. Fishermen just reply with their concerns again.. they do not really respond to the fishery managers concerns. “It is very frustrating.” Many times you talk to the fishers and you explain the issues but they either don’t understand or don’t want to or they are just focusing on their agenda. It is extremely difficult.

Informant talked about work done in Vieques where the fishermen were asked about areas of fish concentration and they found metal objects (left behind by the navy) and they took them and sold them. “What they want is money, that’s their focus.” They want to make money out of the fish, the metal, no matter what it is. “Our focus is conserving the resource.” Researchers are concerned with the monetary value of living resources – tourism industry.

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

Speaker 2. “As good as it can be.” We want the same thing: more fish. Which is better for everybody; for the fishermen, the researchers, and the environment. We (researchers/regulators) are more aware of the biological limits of the system, we care more about the species. For them (fishermen) “there will always be another one.”

There need to be a point of balance to allow one group to extract and sell the resource and other to use the living resource for tourism purposes. Most resources are worth more money live then they are dead. We should allocate resources to allow for traditional fishing practices but not damage recreation and tourism practices. If we allocated all the fishery to commercial fisheries they would probably double their production/income but in the recreation/tourism sector those same resources would net considerably more money.

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

Speaker 2. There are conflicts between commercial and recreational sectors. Conflicts are natural since there is competition. Informant mentioned they gets emails from people reporting on conflicts that happen out in the water between commercial and recreational sectors. Between us (regulators) and fishermen conflicts get resolved by taking into account their concerns. But most of the time they won’t tell you why they are against a certain regulation – they are just opposed to it, period. They are not specific about ways to reach compromises, ways to solve specific issues (informant used examples of gear regulations that can be discussed to reach compromises – mesh size, etc). “They just say they are against it and they get angry.”

We are living in a transition period in PR fisheries – it takes time to change. Transitioning from a time where fishermen could do whatever they wanted, no regulations at all to a time where we are trying to restore fish populations that have declined or almost disappeared. The fishermen are generally old and these are the fishermen who grew up in the “wild west” with no regulations at all.

The ultimate goal is not to do harm to anybody but to recover fisheries for everybody. But the fishermen do not want us to interfere with their lifestyle.

Speaker 1. What else?

* Hook and line vs. beach seine conflict
* Refers to illegal fishermen as poachers.