Key Informant Interview 13

Date: 8/1/2016

Stakeholder Group: NGO

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field: 11 months

Community/Area/Location: San Juan, PR

Speaker 1. Describe your involvement with Puerto Rican fisheries.

Speaker 2. I manage organizational efforts to improve public policy to protect the marine resources in the federal waters of Puerto Rico (9 to 200 nautical miles) and the US Virgin Islands (3 to 200 nautical miles).

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. I don’t have the data to confirm if coastal communities are solely or primarily comprised of fishers, hence I say they are somewhat dependent on fisheries. However, fishers that live in those communities are very dependent on fishing. A lot of them dedicate only to fishing either because they learned fishing with their parents and inherited the business or because they do not have formal education and have less chances of getting other type of jobs.

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

Speaker 2. Very Dependent

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

Speaker 2. Fisheries in Puerto Rico are mostly coral reef based (although some pelagic species and deep water snappers also are important) so fishers depend on their health to have a steady source of income. While tourism businesses and charter boats also benefit from coral reefs as tourists crave for diving and fishing in areas that are rich corals and with a variety of reef fish species.

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. 1) Lack of enforcement; 2) Poor data reporting and monitoring; 3) Lack of respect for regulations; 4) Lack of educational/informational efforts directed to fishers so they can understand the importance of respecting regulations; 5) Need to better engage fishers in decision making processes; 6) Need for additional funding to better manage marine resources- this applies to both DNER & Caribbean Fishery Management Council (CFMC)

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. Yes, one of the topics that has been studied by local scientists is coral reef bleaching, and coast erosion. Water temperatures have become warmer and more acidic which directly impacts the health of the corals.

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

Speaker 2. Some of them know that climate change impacts the health of the fisheries but the majority of them do not see the correlation. They seem to be more worried about existent regulations that limit them from harvesting fish especially during spawning periods.

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

Speaker 2. Yes, the local government created the PR Climate Change Council to study climate change impacts and propose course of action. Scientists are also researching the impacts of climate change in the fishery and the CFMC has discussed the idea of developing a Fishery Ecosystem Plan to manage the many variables that affect the fisheries among them climate change.

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

Speaker 2. Ideally they can work together to tackle the most pressing issues that affect them. But, people have too many preoccupations in their minds, especially now with the island’s fiscal crisis and the uncertainty of how the Oversight Board the US Congress created will affect their lives, hence they don’t seem to have fisheries issues on their radar.

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

Speaker 2. Yes, they can and should be more involved in decision making processes regarding fisheries management. However there are many conflicts among groups in the fishing communities because of differences on how to do things and that INABILITA to work together towards the common good. As the primary stakeholder in the fisheries it is their duty to be part of these processes.

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

Speaker 2. There may be efforts in place but I don’t know of any that are driven by the fishing community.

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

Speaker 2. Yes, and it would be the right thing to do. In order to effectively manage the fisheries, the fishers need to be informed and educated about the need for certain management actions. They should also be involved in formal projects intended to solve fisheries problems. However, sometimes it is difficult for fishers to participate as the process becomes too bureaucratic, the way information is conveyed to them is too complex or it gets to them too late in the process and they cannot effectively participate in solving fishery problems. Other times the fishers do not want to participate as they don’t trust the authorities in charge of management.

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

Speaker 2. I attended two fisher’s forums organized by DNER earlier this year with the intention to learn more about their preoccupations about fisheries and try to find solutions to the issues they feel are affecting them. Another example are the public hearings the CFMC organizes when they are considering new management actions for fisheries and they ask for public input. However, I believe more can be done by both territorial and federal government to involve the fishing community in decision making processes.

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. I think so. Decisions are based on the best available science but I would say the problem is the implementation of the new policies and regulations, specifically in the local government, which rely on whether or not the government employee has the right attitude to do a good job and implement the regulations. For example, there is a lot of complain from the fishers because enforcement officers don’t know the regulations or intervene with commercial fishers but not with the recreational sector.

Sometimes decisions are taken giving too much consideration on how it would affect the fishers and hence the final management action is not the best way to protect the marine resources. For example, last year the CFMC tabled a motion to extend protections to Bajo de Sico, a seamount of west PR that is rich in corals and is the only known Nassau Grouper spawning site in PR. The science pointed out that there was a need to better protect Bajo de Sico but the fishers opposed partially because they were misinformed about what regulation was proposed and why and the CFMC decided not to take action.

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

Speaker 2. I don’t think so. They often confuse the territorial government process with the CFMC process and have the perception that decisions are made from a desk by people with no knowledge about the fisheries in PR. Although the territorial and federal governments have done efforts to explain their processes and how they make decisions they have not been effective on how they present information, clarify doubts and involve fishers in the process in order to minimize distrust. At the same time a lot –not all- of fishers don’t care about the process and complain because they want to be able to fish as much as they want. Others do want to be involved but are not clear as to how to do it.

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

Speaker 2. Fishers distrust fishery managers/decision makers. They feel like any action managers make is to prevent them from fishing and hence leave them without jobs. They don’t understand or don’t want to understand that regulations need to be in place in order to have a sustainable fishery in the future. While managers don’t put much effort on informing, educating and engaging fishers on the issues being discussed.

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

Speaker 2. I don’t know how fishers solve the problems between them but I know that the formal process to solve conflicts between fishers and managers includes public hearings and meetings between managers and fishers where fishers can present their perspectives and present their arguments for opposition although this does not mean they will convince managers of changing the course of action. I think one of the biggest problems in fisheries is precisely that conflicts between fishers and managers are not effectively resolved which turns into distrust from the fishers towards the system and in a lot of cases they violate the regulations.