Key Informant Interview 19 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Research

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location: St

Speaker 1 Interviewee: As a fish biologist.

Speaker 2: Okay. Mm-hmm (affirmative). Would you say that coastal communities in the U.S. Virgin Islands are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: From an economic standpoint, I don't think so. From a cultural standpoint, certainly. Yeah, I would say they definitely are. We're kind of a tourist based island or territory. Probably primarily cruise ships. So, I think economically fisheries is not that important. But certainly culturally.

Speaker 2: And when you say that, could you elaborate a little bit on why you say culturally?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I think, well, for instance, our fish markets are very big. The local people eat a lot of local fish, and so the local fisheries are really important for the local people in that way. Yeah.

Speaker 2: Okay. And would you say that the fishermen themselves in USVI, and of course you can speak for St. Thomas if that's where you're most familiar with. Would you say that the fishermen themselves are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Yep. Absolutely.

Speaker 2: Okay. And in terms of coastal communities' dependency on coral reefs, would you say that they are very dependent on the coral reefs?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, absolutely. Very dependent. Absolutely. And that goes beyond just fisheries. That's for tourism as well.

Speaker 3: And I was going to just ask you, so what do you think are some of the major problems that are facing the fisheries of the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Well, I think that the decline of the coral reefs is a huge one because we're getting so much disease and we're getting so much leaching, or have been over the last 15, 20 years. So that's huge, just loss of living coral. Gigantic. And I mean, I'm involved heavily in a coral reef monitoring program here, and have been for 17 years and I, personally, have documented our coral reefs just declining at unprecedented rates. And so, that's a huge issue. There's also the- Yeah, I can keep going on that question. And then we also have a problem now, and I think it's, we've probably only getting the tip of the iceberg now, but with exotics coming into our marine systems with lionfish, the lionfish invasion, or we have an exotic, very invasive new sea grass that's coming into our bays and our shallow water and just really taking over. And nobody really knows how that's going to affect our larval fish communities or juvenile fish communities, but actually we're doing some research on that now, but it's just definitely a huge, going to be a big, big change, I think, in the next 10, 20 years as far as the fish communities go here in the Virgin Islands. Yeah. And so, of course, then we're also worried about climate change and rising sea temperatures, and that's really interesting for me. Most of the work I do is with spawning groupers and snappers, and their spawning is fairly dependent, or we think, on sea water temperature. And so, when that starts changing, potentially we're going to have some issues of reproduction of fishes. So that's going to be huge, again. Yeah. Not a good picture.

Speaker 3: No. So which, of the three you just mentioned, if you had to rate them, in what order of importance would you put them? I know it's [inaudible 00:05:11].

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, it's really tough. I mean, if the fish don't reproduce you don't even have to worry about the sea grass, it's a... if the juveniles don't have suitable habitat you don't really have to worry about the coral reefs, but the coral reefs, of course, are integral to all of it. So, that's really a difficult one for me. I mean, I guess I would say that the... it's really difficult for me to put one in

front of the other to be honest. I mean, it's all critical habitat and it's all... we just don't know what's going to happen to fisheries without a living coral reef. It's hard to know.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, I also wanted to ask, what do you think are the most significant changes that have occurred on the U.S. Virgin Island fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Okay, in the fisheries. Well, we've had some good things happen, and I think that was a result of, at least this is St. Thomas I'm talking about. St. Croix, I'm not as familiar with the fisheries in St. Croix. But, we've had some big marine reserves go into effect, and that's resulted in an increase in certain fish and an increase in the size, in particular the red hind, which is a small grouper. And there was a giant area closed in 1999, year round closure, and it sort of encased a huge red hind spawning area. And so, the fishermen are now, and they admit it, they think it's the best thing that happened there for a long time. They're getting lots and lots and lots of red hind, and bigger and bigger and bigger every year. In fact, now they complain that they're too big, the fish. Yeah. So, I think the red hind story, that's been a pretty major fisheries change. If you ask the fishermen, and I ask the fishermen all the time, and they say since their fathers fished and their grandfathers fished, there's been this huge overall decline of fish. But they can't really, if I ask them what's happened in the last five years, they'll tell me that nothing's happened or maybe it's gotten a little better. So, that's kind of hard. And I think if you look at the landings records, things have been pretty stable over the last 10 years in St. Thomas. I think in St. Croix there's been a huge reduction of parrot fishes because that's a huge fishery in St. Croix. They have a completely different system than we do. We have this really broad, broad, deep shelf that has a lot of living coral and it's too deep to dive, really. It's like 140, 150 feet, and so that's really too deep to dive and work and go spear fishing, because you only have 10 or 12 minutes. Where in St. Croix, they have a lot of water that's between 40 and 60, 70 feet, so they have this huge spear fishing fishery, and you may know all of this, I don't know. So, they have a completely different fishery. They also... their shelf is narrow and shallow, so they basically fish pelagics off shore, off the shelf, or they spearfish off the shallow part of the shelf. And that's completely different than our fishery. Most of our fishery is trap fishing. It's in deeper water of the reef, and it's trap fishing. So, we don't harvest and sell parrot fish, for instance, whereas it's huge over there in St. Croix. And so, they've really done a number wiping out their parrot fish. But we haven't really had to worry about that as much. And certainly our big groupers and snappers declining, but not near as badly as on St. Croix because we just have this huge, deep shelf, and we have a lot of marine reserves, we have [inaudible 00:10:12] here for fishes. With all the environmental things going on with coral reefs, actually our fisheries have stayed pretty stable, I think, in St. Thomas.

Speaker 3: Okay. Interesting. So, you had mentioned environmental changes happening, and that was going to be another question that we had for you, asking what would you say are the most significant environmental changes that have occurred in the Virgin Islands in the last couple of decades.

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Well, environmental I would say would be the increase in sea temperature. We've had, I can't remember, they count it off all the time here, but we've had like 15 of the last 20 years have been at record sea water temperatures in the summer. And we've had, we get a little, at least partial bleaching of corals every year now. This year was pretty bad. Of course, 2005, everything was bleached and we lost about 40 or 50 percent of all our corals. So yeah, I mean, I think it's the increase in high sea water temperatures.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, have you observed any changes in the fisheries and/or the environment that you think can be contributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I don't know that it's really hit the fishery yet, you know? And when you say, "environmental", I'm thinking of more environmental like, there are a lot of things going on in the Virgin Islands that are... we have a lot of sediment going into the ocean all the time. A huge problem in my mind are the cruise ships that are coming in and dumping whatever they dump. People report watching them dump raw sewage, and on and on and on and on. And just the sediment that they bring up from the bottom when they come. And sure, I don't know, are those environmental issues? They're certainly huge issues here. It's hard to say if they're affecting the fishery. One thing that I'm thinking of now, is we have, the fishermen complain about it a lot and I notice it, is we have the bait fish that they use in their traps in fishing, there's less of it. There used to be bays would get black because they'd be covered in these small bait fishes, anchovies, menhadens, whatever, and that doesn't happen anymore. The bait is not coming in the way it did even when I moved here, 17, 18 years ago. And we don't have the birds that we used to have because I think the birds are following the bait. So, I believe that that might be something that fishermen talk about, is the lack of bait fish now, sprat and fry. They might blame it on the fishermen catching too much or whatever. I don't believe that. I think that that's probably from environmental stuff that's going on in the Virgin Islands or in the region.

Speaker 2: And so, you mentioned increase in water temperatures, and when you talked about bleaching, and I'm sure talking about this, it's all been related issues. Are there any other issues that you are seeing, that you're observing in your research or otherwise that you think could be attributed to climate change?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Oh, okay. Let me think about that one. Besides the coral. I mean, so far, as I said, I spend about 75 percent of my time working with spawning fishes. We haven't seen changes as far as temporal changes in spawning events or anything like that yet. Yeah. Maybe there's something I'm not thinking about, but so far the warming water temperature, mainly it's affecting the coral reefs that I can see. Also, I mean, I don't know about, we have now a huge problem with sargassum coming into the whole region, the whole Caribbean, and they're relating that to, the last I read they're relating that to the African dust that's coming across. They've looked at satellite images of this dust coming across the Atlantic and then overlaid it on the movement of the sargassum. And I believe it's actually the nutrients are allowing the sargassum to grow. So, here's another... I don't know that that has anything to do with warming sea water temperature, but that's actually another thing that could potentially affect our fisheries. Yeah, because, well, it's just also complicated because the sargassum and, are you familiar with it at all? It's kind of, if you know a lot about it then it's easier to talk about this. Okay. So, the stuff washes up on the shoreline in areas where there's coral reefs near the shoreline, where there are in some places here. It just sits there and it decays and it smothers everything. And so, there are bad... and it gets in the way and it fouls people's props and it's a nuisance, blah, blah, blah. On the other hand, it may change larval disbursal because it is a refuge for larvae, and I don't know what kind of effect it's going to have in the long run. But it might be something that fishermen care about. It might be something that they bring up.

Speaker 3: So, Interviewee, in your opinion, do you think that the U.S. Virgin Islands fishers are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, I think they are. I think they're, our fishermen are, at least from St. Thomas, they're not the most educated people in the world but they're pretty smart, and they understand what coral bleaching is, they're afraid of it, they think it's going to affect their fisheries, and they know that it's related to climate change. I don't know how well they understand spawning behavior and spawning timing and how that's related to temperature. I don't know that they're... but I think they are very concerned about it. I think that, yeah, the fishermen generally feel like, from what I understand, they feel like they are blamed for a lot of problems with the fishery, when they think that it's these other things that are really the problem. And, I mean, I don't think they're that far off base. Certainly, over fishing is an issue. I don't know that I would say that there's over fishing in St. Thomas. It's certainly not pristine. Well, the large snappers and groupers are not common anymore. The fish that used to be very common are not common anymore. But I actually, personally, think that some of these other issues are really more dangerous than the level of fishing that we have here. So, I think the fishermen are concerned about climate change.

Speaker 3: Okay. In your opinion, do you think that fishery managers and researchers and decision makers from the U.S. Virgin Islands are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I think people and managers are. I think decision makers, our government, our governor and our senators, no, I don't think that, no, we don't have a very transparent or effective government here. So I don't think they care. I don't think they think about it. I think they think about growth and bringing money to the island, and climate change is the last thing on their mind.

Speaker 2: And so, you work closely with the fishermen, the fishing communities in your work. How would you describe the relationship between members of the fishing community or the coastal communities in the areas where you work?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, I think they're pretty tight in a way. I think it's interesting, fishermen are fishermen all over the world. I've worked with them several places and they tend to be sort of independent and, I guess loners is maybe not the right word, but they have their... they're opinionated and independent, and that's why they do what they do. That's why they go out on boats away from everybody else. They do their own thing. They're kind of a different breed. So, I mean, it's no different here. They are an independent, opinionated group of people, but I think they work pretty well together. And I think that we have really great compliance here with our regulations, which is great, and I think the fishermen, in general, respect each other and respect the profession and they want to see it succeed all the way around.

Speaker 2: And so, you mentioned that they have a good relationship, that they are somewhat cohesive. Are there any examples of them working together to address an issue that you can think of?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Well, they have the, what's it called, the Fishermen's Association here. St. Thomas Fishermen's Association, where they meet, I think, once a month. They had a, I think it was funded by the Fisheries Council, they had a trap reduction committee that was made up of all fishermen, that they worked and they put together a trap reduction plan themselves. To be honest, our fishermen, a lot of them are related. There are maybe seven or eight families that make up the fishing community on St. Thomas. St. Croix is a little bit different. I think you have a different group. But on St. Thomas it's really sort of a misfit family.

Speaker 2: That's funny. Are there examples of the fishermen also getting together socially? Is that something that is common in St. Thomas?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, they have different fishing tournaments, is generally where they get together. They have a Bastille Day. So, on St. Thomas we have this old... the French came over, I don't know, 300 years ago, and they were, in general, the coastal people and the fishermen. So, those were the ancestors, these are the predecessors or whatever of that group. And so, we have Bastille Day on the 14th of July, and there's a huge fishing tournament, and that's huge for the, what we call the Frenchie, the fishing community. And there are a couple of those tournaments and then, I think, again, there are just like three or four main families that socialize together a lot, and they're inter married, and they're... yeah, so I think they'd be socialized a lot.

Speaker 2: And is that fishermen from all parts of the island, or are there specific parts of the island that are more cohesive than others?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, we have the south side and the north side. There are like three or four families from the north side and three or four families from the south side. But they, I don't know, I think they mix pretty well. I think they, like I said, they're all aunts and uncles, married back, forth, the other. They're pretty cohesive across the island.

Speaker 2: Okay. And how would you describe the relationship between the fishermen and the fishery managers in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I think that the fishermen don't, especially right now, I mean it changes, it changes with every governor. We have new people, they get jobs and start working here. So, right now the people in power are not respected or liked very much by the fishermen. Like I said, it changes, but in general there's quite a bit of disrespect for the managers by the fishermen.

Speaker 2: Okay. And do you notice if there's a difference between the relationships with the local government versus the federal government, or is it just pretty much the same?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: It's the same but different. I would say it's disrespect for... they don't like either, for different reasons.

Speaker 2: Okay. Can you think of any examples, and I think you mentioned this a little bit before when you were talking about the association, but are there any other examples of the fishermen and the fishery managers getting together or solving a problem together and sort of working and collaborating?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, well, we have a Fisheries Advisory Council that is, it's actually as of a month ago defunct because the fishermen pulled out of it. But, I mean, I've been sitting on that for 15 years. That's supposed to be exactly that, it's supposed to be representatives from the fishing community. I am sort of the group scientist from the university, and then we have people from local fish and wildlife, people from enforcement, supposedly an attorney there, blah, blah, blah. And it's supposed to be a forum to talk about issues and work out issues. It hasn't been very effective I would say, the last 10 years. Part of the reason is because our local fisheries managers are reappointed every four years when a new governor comes on board. And it's a very small island, there's a just lot of politics, there's a lot of personal grievances, and so it's difficult for the fishermen, I think.

Speaker 2: Yeah. And you mentioned that the fishermen pulled out of the FAC? Was there a specific reason for that, or just a general [crosstalk 00:29:23]?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, their reason was because they felt like this was supposed to be a forum that was autonomous, that was not part of the government, that they could feel free to talk and to make decisions and to try to move things along. And the meetings are actually run by the USVI Fish and Wildlife. They rent the room and they write the minutes up and sort of facilitate it. And so, our new director had decided she wanted to move the meetings to a different night or something like that, and the fishermen didn't want to. They wanted the old night. And she said she wasn't going to support the meetings anymore if we didn't change it. So, that was sort of the last whatever, straw on the camel's back. There had been a lot of things leading up to that, but they felt like this new director was just trying to take over the whole meeting, and no matter what was decided or what was done within the FAC, we were throwing it up against a brick wall when we went to the local government. Yeah. And so they just felt like it was just another part of the government, and they didn't want to be part of it.

Speaker 3: So, Interviewee, I know we've asked you a couple of questions about fishery management, and I wanted to sort of continue on that and ask you if you felt that the fishery management in the U.S. Virgin Islands is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Well, I'm a fish biologist and a conservationist, so I'm going to say I think everything's been great. I mean, in the last 10 years a lot of management has gone down the pipes. As I said, in 1999, they closed a huge area off the bank which not only protected red hind grouper, that's a success story, I think it's one of the reasons our fishery is as good as it is, because it's this giant coral reef area that's just shut down to all kinds of fishing. And there's all kinds of... we do a lot of diving inside that area, and it's just amazing. It's really great. But I think that spillover has helped, so I think that was a good management option back then. Since then, they've also closed an area called the Grammanik Bank, which is where I work, and we were instrumental in having that closed. And that's where the Nassau grouper and yellowfin and about 10 other species of fish spawn, so that was a really good management. And I don't think the fishermen mind those two things necessarily. The other things that they've implemented are some seasonal closures. For grouper, I believe it's February through May, it's illegal to sell any type of grouper besides red hind. And then, in the summertime, I believe it's May to August, they're not allowed to sell any of the large snappers. And I think that's where the fishermen might feel that these seasonal closures are not... nobody's really done any research to see if they've worked, or if they were needed, or... I personally think those closures are probably not, based on what I know, without snappers spawning, which I've worked the last 15 years on, I don't think those closures probably were needed here in St. Thomas. I think they were a little over the top, mostly because the snappers spawn all year round, and most of the big snappers we have here are [inaudible 00:34:03] toxic, and they're not really targeted much anyway, so.

Speaker 3: Right. So were those closures, were those done by the local government?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I think they came through the federal government, but then they just went ahead and, the local government closed, to keep it across the board, they agreed to close it in shore as well in state waters.

Speaker 3: So, do you think there are some differences between how the decisions are made and whether or not they are considered to be fair? Are there differences in how the local government is perceived to make those decisions compared to the federal government?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, I think the local government, I think they just want to make everything across the board for several reasons. Number one, for enforcement, because it's a huge enforcement problem if they don't have these rules go into local waters as well. I mean, they didn't for a long time until, I don't know, I think 2005 or something, the regulations were totally different in state and federal waters. But, yeah, I think it's a matter of enforcement and also I think that they want to comply with NOAA, and they don't want NOAA to shut down fisheries. The federal waters start three miles out, and so all of our fisheries are three miles out. Basically, all the fish that are sold in the market are caught more than three miles out. They're caught in federal waters. So, I think that, in order to keep NOAA happy and keep them from closing off everything, they have complied and made these regulations all the way in to state waters as well.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, do you think most of the fishers in the U.S. Virgin Islands understand how fishery managers make these decisions?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: I think they try. I think that we, as an FAC group, we go to Puerto Rico, we go to Caribbean Fisheries Management meetings, the fishermen, it's mostly fishermen in our group. They all come, they all sit at the table, we have these discussions. I think they really try to see how decisions are made, and I think they don't really trust the way they're made and they don't respect the way they're made, but they certainly try to know. They try to learn what's going on and how these decisions are made. I actually have a lot of respect for St. Thomas fishermen. I think they really are... it's something that's been in their family forever. They're in it for the long haul, and they want it to continue.

Speaker 3: Right. Do you think there are, if they exist, are there conflicts between fishers? And if so, how do you think they resolve those conflicts?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Oh, okay, yeah. There's always conflicts between people that, probably, that do the same thing or fight over the same resource. So, they get mad at each other, sometimes they think people steal their traps or the smaller fishermen get upset because the wealthier fishermen have what they consider way too many traps, or over exploiting, or exploiting the resource. Yeah, there's a lot of that here. I think probably most of it is... now that I'm thinking about it, most of it might just be that. They think that the resource is being over exploited by the wealthier fishermen that have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of traps. So, that's probably the biggest conflict. How they deal with it?

Speaker 3: Yeah, how do they resolve them?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, I don't know how they do that.

Speaker 3: How about between fishers and fishery managers? Do you believe there are conflicts that exist between them, and the same thing, if so, what are they and how do they resolve them?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: Yeah, I think again, there are. And again, I'm going to go back to the fact that every time we get a different governor we get someone new appointed to run Fish and Wildlife. And we get new people in coastal zone management and, yeah, there are lots and lots of conflicts. And we have people, some managers, for instance the coastal zone, our Commissioner of Natural Resources right now is, he was actually a graduate student here years ago, but he's extremely coral centric. He's not a fisheries person at all. He's an environmentalist, so he is really sort of not interested in promoting or enhancing fisheries at all. He would like to see them go away because he thinks that fishing is destroying coral reefs. So, there's that kind of stuff comes up constantly. Constantly. And so, yeah, there are lots and lots of problems between the managers and the... more, I think, now than I've ever seen. But, how they deal with them, I don't know. [inaudible 00:41:17] they walk out of the room. That's typical fishermen. They walk out of the room. Stomp out of the room. Yeah. They're not good with people. That's why they fish.

Speaker 2: So, yeah, I mean these are pretty much all our questions. If there is anything that you want to add, anything that we didn't talk about that you think is important that we should mention...

Speaker 1 Interviewee: -get going I'm kind of passionate. Yeah, I mean, if we go all the way, all the way back to you asking me about issues with changes and problems with the fisheries or with what's coming down the pipes, I said I didn't think fishing was so much of a problem. I think that I should take that back. I think that there are, and the fishermen feel this way and I have to agree with them. There are people that now, and especially the north side fishermen because they, it's just really funny but it turns out they are up in what was the country and they have huge, their families had big tracts of land which are now being sold. So, you have a lot of really wealthy people up there, and they're local people. They're fishermen. And they're wealthy because of all the land that they inherited that they're now selling off. It's beautiful over there. It's beautiful. So, there are a handful of north side fishermen that are just really going heavy. They have a lot of money and they're buying lots and lots and lots and lots of traps. And so, that's something that you will probably hear fishermen tell you about, is just the huge number of traps that the wealthier fishermen are now buying. And it's a new thing. It's younger guys. Younger guys, they sold off their grandparents' land, and they're just putting everything into fish pots. Yeah.

Speaker 2: Interesting. So are there a good amount of young people that are coming into the fishery, would you say?

Speaker 1 Interviewee: No. That's really... actually we have a moratorium in place, and it's been before I came here, so over 20 years, so when you leave the fishery, your license goes to... it has to be given by us, by the FAC. We have to hand it down either to your children, your wife, your spouse, your children, or your helper. But you have to go in and petition for it. I mean, it's a big deal. And so, our fishing community has actually not changed size. If anything, it's gotten a little smaller, and the local fishermen want to keep the moratorium because they don't want outsiders coming in. They want to keep it within their families, which I agree with. I think that's good. But there's a problem now that a lot of the kids don't want to fish because it's hard work, and it's a hard way to make a living. So, they're going to school or becoming a carpenter or whatever, and they're actually having a problem now finding local kids that want to enter the fishery. Yeah. So, that's a big problem that fishermen talk about, is the lack of local kids that want to fish.