Key Informant Interview 7 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Researcher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1: So just to start, if you could just describe a little bit about your involvement with USVI fisheries, just so that we can begin our conversation.

Speaker 2:Okay. So I'm involved in a couple of different ways. [...] There's a committee on St. Croix and one on St. Thomas. I've been on... Well, one of the requirements of this committee is that they have someone from the university on it. [...] And so we meet on a monthly basis and discuss fishery issues and make recommendations to the commissioner on issues. [...] And in terms of my UVI involvement, I'm part of a research team that monitors coral reefs and fisheries. We're just talking about the fishery and the reefs at this point. So we go out on an annual basis and count fish and size them and just by looking at them diving. [...] I'm not a fisher, although I do collect a lobster here and there but I'm not a commercial or even considered a recreational fisher.

[...]

Speaker 1: Excellent. Wow. So would you say, Interviewee, or would you consider in your opinion, USVI coastal communities to be highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2:Yes. I mean, it's not that everybody necessarily eats a lot of seafood, but in terms of our other marine resources, coral reefs and tourism, I mean, that's all part of it. And our main economy here is tourism, so that relates to fisheries. People like to go out and look at the fish [inaudible 00:13:47].

Speaker 1: Yeah. And a similar question, but would you say, and again, this is your opinion, would you say that the fishermen in the USVI are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 2:Yes. There are a couple of different groups of fishermen. There are full time and then there are part-timers. So obviously the full-timers are very, very dependent on the fisheries and the part-timers, they often have a job and they just do this to supplement their income or feed their family and friends.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative). And you already touched upon this a little bit, but would you say that coastal communities in the VI are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2:Yes. Yeah. I think that's one of the main reasons people like to visit here when they can go to a beach anywhere, but not everywhere can they go to coral reefs and have good snorkeling and diving and yeah, I do.

Speaker 1: And do you see that dependence as being more on the tourism side?

Speaker 2:Yes.

Speaker 3:Interviewee, I was just going to ask you a few additional questions. So my first question was, what would you say is, or what are the major problems facing fisheries in the USVI?

Speaker 2:Okay. Well, I know I would not be agreed with by many of the fishermen, but I think overfishing is the big one. These fishermen, even though there's not a whole lot of them, the ones that are here feel like we owe them a living and they should be allowed to take as many fish as they want and with as little

regulation as possible. So overfishing is certainly one of them. And I don't think there are any studies in terms of climate change, but I have a feeling that it is affecting our fisheries, but there's no data to base that on, but I know that the water is getting warmer and it's got to be making some difference in that. And then there's just water quality issues, which has always been a problem for coastal waters. And it's not necessarily any worse now than it was 35 years ago when I got here, but it is a problem and we have certainly less and less fish. And so that's some of the problems and I'm sure that's what the of fishers would say. That the big problem is the water pollution, it's not them.

Speaker 3:Right. So you listed several things, could you rank them for us, which one you think is the most important out of the three and then the next important?

Speaker 2:Okay. So personally, I think it's overfishing, number one. And after that, I think global climate change is going to become more and more of a problem. And the fact that we don't have any documentation, it's hard for me to say it's a problem, but I have a feeling it is. I think a lot of things are changing down here and we're not detecting them, certain species just being absent now or decreasing, and nobody's out there monitoring or saying exactly what it's from. But I believe climate change is definitely... Oh, well, yeah. Then there's all this coral diseases. SCTLD is wiping out our corals, I didn't think of that immediately. Yeah, definitely number two is climate change. And probably exacerbates the disease that we have, but certainly the bleaching which has caused the decline of a lot of our corals. And on top of that, we've got the disease, which may or may not be related to climate change, but certainly the bleaching is.

Speaker 1: So I just have a quick follow up question. When you say overfishing, are there specific resources that you think are especially hit hard or is it just across the board, all the economically important species?

Speaker 2:Well, it really just stresses me when we have spawning aggregations and they're not protected and fishermen just go out there and then just keep hauling them in and can wipe out whole populations of species. So they're the ones, those, the aggregating ones. And then, there's the reef fish, the herbivores, the tangs and the surgeons and all the ones that we need to keep our reefs healthy, that seem to be taken, the parrot fish. Yeah. I guess not so much the [playtics 00:19:36], although yeah, it's hard. I mean, those are offshore, so I don't have a good handle on how those populations are changing, but we know the reef fish, that they are becoming less diverse and less abundant and certain species are no longer here.

Speaker 3:Okay. So I feel as if you've [inaudible 00:20:08] answer this question, but I'm going to ask it formally. What would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the USVI fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2:Depends on the species. Like, for example, conch, when I first got here in late 70s, you could practically walk along in the water and pick up a conch. Now you've got to dive down to depth with scuba gear, 90 feet to get a lot of conch. So abundance of conch is one, and I know I can't do this with all the species, and then it's the numbers and diversity of fish on the reef. Oh, and the sizes. Forget that. I mean, it seems like... And then, well, I said certain species dropping out, like the groupers. I used to love to go out and see big groupers. Well, you don't see any groupers anymore, let alone big ones. They're gone.

Speaker 3:Wow. Okay. And what would you say are the most significant environmental changes that have occurred in the USVI in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2:Oh, there's so many. Some of them aren't necessarily manmade. I mean, like the die off of the diademas in the 80s. Who knows where that came from, but as a result, and they still haven't recovered or they're only a fraction of what they used to be. As a result of that, our reefs are no longer coral dominated, they're algal dominated. So that's a big one, but it's not just the diadema, it's the white band disease that wiped out all of our acropora. And now there's SCTLD, which stony coral tissue loss disease, which is wiping out a lot of our, well, a lot of species. And so, those are, I would call non manmade or we can't tie them to any particular human activities. I don't think. All right. What was the question? What are the main environmental things? Okay. Well, I guess it would be like I said, the wiping out of certain things, certain species, the acroporids and the diadema.

Speaker 3:Okay. And of these changes that you talked about in the fisheries, as well as the environment, do you think they can be attributed to change in the local climate? So have you observed any changes in the USVI fisheries and, or the environment that you think can be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2:So, well, the one that I already talked about, the coral bleaching, yes. So we had the mass bleaching in '05 and I forgot all the other years. That wiped out a large chunk of our reefs, so that's definitely climate related. The other ones, I don't think we can pin it on climate. It may be, but I don't think we can.

Speaker 3:Okay. So in your opinion, are US Virgin Island fishers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2:That's a good question. I don't know that they are actually. I mean, they're seeing a reduction in catch, but I don't think they are attributing it to climate. I think they're attributing it to other things. I don't know. They don't talk about that. When they talk about problems or reasons why the fisheries may be decreasing, although they won't quite admit that either, they talk about pollution, development, things like that.

Speaker 3:Okay. How about the fishery managers and researchers and decision makers? In your opinion, do you think that these individuals are concerned about climate change in the USVI?

Speaker 2:Yes. So we're talking about Department of Planning and Natural Resources, maybe specifically the division of fish and wildlife and coastal zone management. Yeah. I think they know what's going on. They know climate change is important and they have programs that increase education and do outreach on climate change. So I do think they are aware of it. How much priority they give it, I don't know. I mean, we have other problems, like just enforcement of fisheries regulations. I mean, if they could do that, they would really help a lot. So doing stuff around climate change isn't low hanging fruit.

Speaker 1: So, Interviewee, I have a couple of questions about relationships between different stakeholders, fishery stakeholders in the USVI, how would you describe the relationship between fishers in the USVI? So amongst themselves, so between fishers and other fishers.

Speaker 2:Oh, they don't generally act as a team. They seem to be out for themselves. Sometimes they come together if they're trying to fight a regulation or something like that, but I mean, there is no co-op here. They're each man for themselves basically, they don't come together and try to do activities together, try to build facilities or other things like other groups I know do. There was a co-op in St. Thomas. I'm not sure how active it is now, but they would come together and they had a building and they bought an ice machine and blah, blah, blah. On St. Croix, not so much. I mean, really, they seem to be very suspicious of each other.

Speaker 1: Okay. And so you mentioned that sometimes they will get together to fight something like a management decision or something like that. Are there any other examples of fishers getting together to address an issue that you can think of?

Speaker 2:Yeah. No. The only time I see them getting together is when DPNR is proposing some kind of a restriction and they want to fight it because they don't want any restrictions. I don't see that. Even the fish market, they don't seem to care to get together and lobby or anything like that.

Speaker 1: Okay. And you already talked a little bit about this, but what about socially? Do the fishers get together socially? Are there any instances or any special dates where the fishers in St. Croix get together?

Speaker 2:Well, I'm socially not tied into the fishers. I mean, I go to meetings with them, but it's not like I go to social activities with them. We have a Christmas party, where everybody makes a fish, but no, I guess I can't really speak to how much they socialize among each other. I suspect it isn't very much.

Speaker 1: Okay. And how would you describe the relationship between fishers and fishery managers in the USVI or specifically St. Croix? And if applicable and you can think of it and it is distinct between local and federal government, could you talk a little bit about the difference between the two?

Speaker 2:Okay. Well, I think that depends upon the administration. In the past administration, there was a director of fish and wildlife who was very keyed into the fishers. And it turns out it was a St. Thomas group, but she purportedly, didn't like the St. Croix fishers, which I kind of agree with that she didn't like us. But generally, I think the fishers realize they have to deal with them and they are respectful and try to get along. I don't know. And again, and part of is personalities too. There used to be a fisheries bureau chief that was very much in line with the fishers, but that person has come and gone three or four times since I've been here, and now it just changes with the personnel. And in terms of federal people, we don't have any federal fishery people here. I mean, there's the Caribbean Fisheries Management Council, but they're not here. They're based out of Puerto Rico. And we go to meetings with them on Zoom, or maybe once a year they'll fly us over for a meeting. So that's who you mean in terms of the federal? I mean, are there any other ones I'm not thinking about that are... I think that Miguel gets along with Carlos really well, and he makes a point of trying to be nice to all the fishers and pretend like he's on their side. And I guess maybe he is, I don't know. I can't figure him out completely, because he doesn't seem like a manager. He sometimes seems like he's there to defend a fisherman when I think he should be trying to protect our resources. That's my own personal opinion.

Speaker 1: Yep. And can you... I mean, and it's perfectly fine if you can't think of any examples, but if you can think of, are there any examples of fishers and fishery managers getting together to address a specific issue that you can think of?

Speaker 2:Okay. Well, I know that there was a couple of grants that went out and some fishers were helping on that, particularly, taking them to sites so that they could do monitoring. So yeah, there were some of those. Barbara Coaches, who was the director of fish and wildlife fund. She was located on St. Thomas, but it's a territorial position. She was working with some fishers and doing some Latin snapper monitoring, but there were several studies like that, where the fishers were involved. Not enough. I mean, they're kind of isolated and I don't think there have been any recently. I mean, I've been here a long time, so in the last five years, I can't think of any.

Speaker 3:So where did you come from that brought you to the USVI? How did you wind up in the USVI?

Speaker 2:I came down here after college, teaching scuba diving, and then I got a job with the Department of Planning and Natural Resources on St. Thomas, and then was transferred over here to St. Croix where I worked with Dr. Caroline Rogers. I don't know if you know her, but she's with the USGS. And worked for them for 13 years in environmental protection division. And then after hurricane Hugo, I worked at the [Westend 00:34:16] East Lab facility on the east end that got wiped out and sold. I got a job with the university and started working here and I've been here 30 years now, getting ready to retire this year. Yeah. It's interesting. Yeah, you could say I know all the characters down here, and their kids and sometimes their grandkids.

Speaker 3:Nice. So I was just going to ask a couple of more questions that are related to fishery management in the USVI. So do you feel that fishery management in the USVI is fair in the decisions they make?

Speaker 2:Yes.

Speaker 3:And if you have examples that separate local and federal, you could share them as two separate entities.

Speaker 2:What do you mean by fair? Fair to the fishermen or fair in total in terms of taking into the environment and everything? I'm not really sure what you mean.

Speaker 3:Yeah. So I think in total, the overall how fisheries is managed in the USVI.

Speaker 2:Yes, I think it's fair. I mean, if you ask the fishers, they may think they're not. All of them, all the regs and limits and stuff aren't fair, but I do when you consider what they're trying to do, trying to manage a fishery where the fishers don't want to be managed.

Speaker 3:Mm-hmm (affirmative). And do you think there's a distinction between the local and federal government when it comes to the fairness and the decisions that are made?

Speaker 2:There's a couple of things I would say that I was disappointed with, with the council when they change limits and they allow more fish of a certain kind to be harvested, when to me, it seems like they should be protected more. But in general, I think that they are trying to be fair and I tend to be on the more environmental side, and they're trying to play both sides. The council. Oh, not the council. See, I've been to some council members, but I'm not a member. And I think the council in general is probably fairer than the administration, Miguel and [inaudible 00:37:37] and those guys. The staff seem to be more into the fishers, the council, I think, aren't there representatives from the federal government and there's scientists, and I know there's some fishers on there too. I think they would be fairer than the staff. But I guess I can't really speak with authority on that not being a part of the council or seeing them regularly. So I'll take that back.

Speaker 3:Okay. Do you think most fishers in the USVI understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2:Yeah, I do. I think they're cognizant of the methods and I know whenever there's any new regulations, it's explained. They understand, they know the terminology, they're not ignorant of it. They just don't always like it.

Speaker 3:Okay. And then if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and fishery managers resolved? Actually, let me rewind for one minute. So if conflicts exist between fishers and fishers, do you know how those are resolved?

Speaker 2:Gunshots. It's what I suspect. It's a wild world out there. I don't know. I really don't know. I know that there's talk about this one did this and this one did that and he did this to get them back. I don't know. I can't speak to that, because I don't have firsthand knowledge of it. I hear some of the melee going on, but I don't really know.

Speaker 3:Okay. And then how about if there are conflicts that exist between fishers and fishery managers? Do you know how those are resolved?

Speaker 2:Yeah. They're not always resolved. I mean the fishers just sometimes don't agree, and they just have to eat it because they're not in charge or they just don't do it. Or if the catch limit is too low, then they'll just do poaching, catch it on the side and not report it. I think there's a lot of poaching. It's not always the licensed commercial fishing, there's a lot of illegals that go out. They don't have a fishing license, they just go out, they collect their stuff and they come in, they don't report it, they're not supposed to be taking any of it. But the lack of enforcement down here is a big issue. And if we could just enforce all the regs we have on the books and we'd be doing a lot better, but we don't seem to be able to do that. [because of] Not enough resources. I think the division of environmental protection, who does all the enforcement for all of DPNR, they only have a limited number of officers. Generally, they don't even have a boat that runs, I would say most of the time. And they don't get paid by fish and wildlife, or very little percentage of the officer's salaries come from fish and wildlife. So they have to concentrate or I guess, they choose to concentrate on areas where their funding's coming from, like coastal zone management, looking at permit compliance and that kind of thing. So the fisheries just take a backseat because of lack of money in that area and resources, local resources.

Speaker 1: From your experience, have you noticed or do you think the compliance has gotten worse or better, or has that changed at all in the years that you've worked in the USVI?

Speaker 2:That's a good question. I think it's gotten a little better, the compliance. I know that they're doing, under the new fish and wildlife director, she's filled a lot of positions. What do you call the people who are at the fish markets monitoring what the catch is? I forgot what that position is called. They're doing more of that. The fishers, I know that I'm touch with on the committee, they're aware of all the regs and I think there might be more compliance than when I first started. But again, I don't see it all. I'm not out there in the nights where spawning aggregations are in effect to see how many fish are taking. I just hear stories.

Speaker 1: So I think these are all our questions. Is there anything that we haven't talked about or anything that you would like to add?

Speaker 2:I think it would be good if we could have compatible regulations, federal and local, because right now there's different size limits, [inaudible 00:44:23] numbers, all kinds of differences between the fed and the local regs in certain species. And so that makes it a little more difficult to enforce and also a little more difficult for the fishers to understand. But that is something that we've been talking, well, we've been talking about it for decades, but I think we're actually starting to make some progress on that. The last meeting we sat down and we talked specifically about where we need to become more compatible, and I think that we're starting to build consensus on trying to make some changes there. Also, I think one of the things that we really need is we need to revise or upgrade, not upgrade, update the 3330, the local fisheries regulations. They haven't been changed in decades, and so we've still got really, really low fines and things that definitely need to be changed. And something that we were working on and there were some federal funds to do that, and then I don't know what happened. The funds ran out or the grant ran out or something, and all of a sudden that still doesn't seem to be... nothing's happening. And it would be nice to have more support for fishing aggregation buoys, so that we could take some pressure off the reef fisheries. And that's something that the fishers keep saying, "Yeah, we need this, we need this," but just never seems to take place, or I don't know, it's permitting issues or what it is, but it seems to take decades to do anything. So, yeah. I mean, I don't have anything else. I think that would be helpful to you.