Key Informant Interview 9 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Other

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1: So just to start, could you describe your involvement with USVI Fisheries for us?

Speaker 2: [...]

Speaker 1: Wow. And so would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2: Not really I think with the cultural changes that came along with being a US territory like McDonald's and Colonel Sanders and supermarkets and the more modern stuff we have. I don't think people, of course it is still love catfish and parrotfish and this and that, but I think it was started without it.

Speaker 1: Okay. And would you say that USVI fishermen are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 2: A hundred percent fishermen... Many people wear a lot of hats, a lot of jobs, like driving a taxi cab or [electricians] or it's not their 100% job to have a coat, so they may be a farmer one day and a fisherman the next.

Speaker 1: Okay. And how about in terms of, if USVI coasted communities could you say that they are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2: Well, the coral reefs of course, you're going to have your fish there and so some of the reefs do protect our Island, from hurricane and stuff. So I guess I have to say yes. So we sit coastal, we're a tiny Island, so almost everything's coastal here, I mean I'm up on the mountains here and I'm looking down at the ocean so, I can walk down there.

Speaker 3: Nice. So Interviewee, I am just going to ask you now a few questions and the first one is what would you say are the major problems that are facing fisheries in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: My hit number one would be overfishing. It's just devastating the differences in the lack of species of fish that we have now than we used to have, and I believe that was all created by the use of gillnets after Hurricane Hugo, which are illegal but are still being used. So that's part of it and then of course with the global challenges, we have. The water is a lot warmer, probably more acidic and people still pull those at that [inaudible 00:05:27] frames and, when it rains and you get a lot of silt in the water. But I think the number one thing has been overfishing.

Speaker 3: Okay. If you had to rank the others that you mentioned, how would you rank them in order after overfishing?

Speaker 2: Well probably... Well another problem we have or The Lionfish Invasion. They’re not eating everything, but what they're doing is they're eating the, fight the cleaner fish and stuff which helps keeps the disease off the other fish and, the cleaner shrimps and all that. So they're destroying the balanced nature of that disrupting things. Yeah the reefs being killed from pollution or human pollution, regular sewage pollution here as well. And we have over the other side of the Island we have, The Rum Factory of fluid and then you have a refinery that's getting ready to start up and it's kind of scary.

Speaker 3: Okay. And then what would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the U.S. Virgin Islands Fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Would be the fish are missing. So starting with the large Groupers, and then the large Parrotfish, and now it's most Parrotfish that's the target fish so I rarely see a pair of fish in my hand.

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

Speaker 2: The amount of algae on the reef. There's more algae than there is live coral reef. Because of lack of grazers and then of course the pollutant in the water, the fertilizers all that stuff. I'd probably say it was probably the early 90s. I mean, there was always some [algae] I mean, I wish I could go and look at... I had a lot of photographs I lost them all to Hurricane Hugo so it was like 89 so there's no way I could go back and look at certain dive sites and say, Oh no [inaudible 00:08:56], but there might be some people on Island that might have.

Speaker 3: Wow. That is such a loss right? Of all of that I'm sure for you personally, and then also scientifically I'm sure. And is there anything else that you would say... Other environmental changes that you've noticed over the time you've been in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: Basically like the fish and the algae growth.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, have you observed any changes in the USVI Fisheries and our environment that you think could be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: Well, not just local climate, global the oceans lot warmer now than it used to be. I first got here in the 70s, the water temperature would go as low as 74 degrees and then maybe as high as 80, and right now it's 84 and summers only halfway here. It has never gotten below 80 at all this year, last year in the winter time, we didn't have a winter.

Speaker 1: I just have a quick follow up Interviewee, just because I'm thinking here you have like just a great experience diving and just seeing all these things firsthand. Could you talk a little bit about how you see... How climate change is affecting this environment from your perspective of just diving in these waters?

Speaker 2: How do I see it? I see it as devastating. There are days I want to cry when I dive certain areas because of just [the death] on the reef or the quiet the look of animals, the lack of corals and the algae just everywhere and even like sponges that we were you used to see, like orange and yellow and purple sponges, and they're all encrusted and it's like [they’re] trying to filter stuff and they're clogged up, so I'm sure when we had the [Sahara dust] that's coming through, that also affects the coral reef, but it's just heartbreaking, I guess.

Speaker 3: Absolutely. So in your opinion, do you believe that USVI Fishers are concerned about climate?

Speaker 2: I think if they believe in it... I couldn't really say what they're thinking or whatever I had a Fisherman come in the store the other day, he's a Lobster Fisherman and he says "no more lobsters are left." He says it's the end of the world, and it's like yeah I'm not sure. And then you have other guys that say, if I don't get the last fish someone else will. So it's not idea of looking into the future and preserving, or handing down a business to a son or daughter or something. Yeah, it depends on the education some of the fishermen don't have a high education so I see some of them out with their little kids, instead of being in school, when you had school, they'd be on a fishing boat it's not good, so as far as... Unless they watch television, the news or whatever I don't know if they really have a handle of climate change. And a lot of these fishermen are younger guys, like in their 20s so they don't know any different.

Speaker 3: Right. Okay, and then in your opinion are the USVI Fishery Managers and Researchers and other decision makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I haven't spoken to anyone about it, so I can't really say yes or no, or how people feel other people feel. Yeah, I guess on the Board for the Fisheries Advisory it never comes up [no one mentions] climate change.

Speaker 1: And so, I have a few questions Interviewee about, the relationships in the community, how would you describe the relationship between fishers in the USVI? So just from your perspective working with the fishers. Did they have a good relationship? Are there conflicts? How would you describe that relationship?

Speaker 2: Well outside of the fisheries they have a relationship with them whatsoever. They have their customers and they set up their place to sell in one area and they keep getting the same customers over and over again wanting certain species of fish or whatever. That's kind of how they work whereas I don't see any tourists going and saying, "Hey, I want to buy Blue tangs or Butterflyfish. More than anything they might go to a local Fisher and get lobster if you know their lobsters they're hanging in a tree or whatever, it's more of a local thing that USVI. Well there's 100,000 people and none of them are buying from the fisheries or fishers.

Speaker 1: And what about between fishers and other fishers amongst the fishermen themselves?

Speaker 2: Oh, there's some gunshots there's been, one time my brother and my dad took our dive boat out and went to one of The Moorings where [not mooring, FAD] where he could, find like tuna, dolphin or [wahoo] or something and there was two guys going at it shooting each other with a flare gun and stuff. I was here first or whatever. Unfortunately, some of the fishers are involved in the drug trade so it's [inaudible 00:16:29] cover to pick up square grouper or the white lobster or whatever. That's not uncommon either especially with this younger guys they're more apt to be in the drug industry. So I don't know... If there's a crisis, they all band together and they are united but, I think separately is like, you stay out of my part of the reef, you stay off of mine. I mean, this is what I can't pick up from the meetings, the before and after chats during the meetings. That'd be a better question to ask the fishers because, I don't know exactly what they do all the time.

Speaker 1: Right. It's interesting that you said when there was a crisis that they, get together because that was going to be my next question. If you can think of any examples of the fishermen were getting together to address an issue. Do you remember

Speaker 2: Yeah, when the Magnuson-Stevens Act was created we had to cut back 30% all commercial fishing and the fish and wildlife was trying to figure out a decent way to do it without hurting everybody, but everybody felt like they're being pooped on. And they're just saying a moratorium on new fishing license that doesn't hurt anybody. They felt that wasn't fair and then cutting back on, types of the gillnets and all that they said these are totally banned once and for all because of this new regulation and people were pissed about that and then it's just one of those things... It's something that's very cultural here they can't tell me what to do attitude especially when it comes from the States. This doesn't make sense to them, and so that's the last time that everybody kind of banded together, and I think with when they're trying to do closures of places. I think they get a little upset as well and they don't want... They were trying to cut back on the amount of fish traps, fish pots, they’re just finding that the abandoned ones keep killing as they're not really going by the regulations of biodegradable doors or anything like that. But I, think the last big time is, when they did... Oh I know the other one was when the East End Marine Park was formed, by Noah and even though 82% of it is open to commercial fishing, they were all upset because there're certain areas that are closed and they're like turtle nesting areas and places where they probably never fished in their lives anyway but, once again it's a thing of our Island don't tell us what to do type of thing. And also when Buck Island Monument was expanded and that was, boy, when Clinton was in office just before he left office. He signed a thing to expand the, Buck Island monument waters and that's definitely no fishing, it’s a national park, no commercial fishing. So they were upset about that and tried to band together and got the Congresswoman involved and she was on their side, anyway so once something happens that could affect their livelihood they do band together.

Speaker 1: Okay. And to the best of your knowledge do you know if the fishermen get together socially in the communities where you interact with the fishermen?

Speaker 2: Oh boy, I'm sure there are certain ones that do get together.. once again, the only time that I have any real social things going on with the fishers, is around Christmas time we all have like a dinner together but, yeah that's once a year, I’m sure the others, especially on the weekends or, they're all good cooks.

Speaker 1: And how would you describe the relationship between the fishermen and the Fishery Managers in the USVI? And if it makes sense for you to make a distinction between the Local government and the Federal government, that would be great.

Speaker 2: Well with the Federal government they really can't touch the fishermen too much unless it comes to like, Oh, I want to see pelagic fish or fishing in the EEZ path, [bank islands] there where they laying banks areas, I'm sure there's other areas around St. Thomas, St. John's. St.John's is a national park area I'm not sure about that but, we basically have a three mile limit off shore. Now the management here, we have enforcement, which really does enforcement and then just lack of manpower and sometimes we have like right now we have a conch closure and then somebody gets arrested for having, harvested conch selling it to a restaurant. It goes to court and then the judge kind of said, well, what's wrong with that? [but] the population of conch is really dwindling right now, and they changed directors all the time and, so when you don't have consistent people and ideas and pops going on it's hard, because the next new director, it takes them forever to catch up on what was going on before and writing grants and just trying to get their office together that it's really hard for them to do part of the job and plus lack of people they never have enough people, they always have vacancies.

Speaker 1: And how would you say that affects the relationship between the managers and the fishermen?

Speaker 2: Well it depends on the person and it could be you guys come from this page with your degrees and about our fish yeah we know more about the fish than you do and I can understand why, some kid who went to school that just gets this job that tells them they can or cannot fish. Once again I am not in that off to hear this conversations going on. It'd be best if we asked the Board about fish and wildlife.

Speaker 1: Can you think of any examples where the fishermen and the fishery managers got together to address an issue, something where they agreed and sort of worked collaborative or not necessarily agreed, but worked collaborative to solve a problem.

Speaker 2: Well only when we had the Magnuson-Stevens Act it happened, we had many meetings and that was with fish and wildlife people trying to figure out, the best way to cut back 30% without hurting anybody they were really trying on that one , a long time ago.

Speaker 3: So Interviewee, do you feel that fishery management in USVI is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2: Well, they're not making a lot of decisions. We have a Fisheries Advisory we let the Commissioner of DPNR, know what's going we have our finger on the pulse on what's going on in the fisheries but, I'll say, I don't know if that's a hard one it really is. You would have to talk to probably the Commissioner of DPNR and probably the Director of Fish and Wildlife to get a real answer on that one.

Speaker 3: Okay. And I mean I know that is true for the local, but would you be able to answer that related to the Federal government?

Speaker 2: Well once again I mean the Federal government hasn't really done anything in the long long long time regarding fisheries here. I mean the Federal government gave the VI government, money for the East End Marine Park it's not it's maintained by the DPNR. Okay. A local government. I mean, I think the only thing that we're really trying to do right now even has anything to do with the Federal government and they're not really technically involved but, trying to get Virgin Island laws to mirror Federal laws of... If you can get a Yellowtail snapper in the Virgin islands that has to be nine inches whereas in federal waters, it has to be 12, but who's to say that is you fish in federal waters and bring back all these nine inch fish so, they're trying to coordinate things like that and that's from a local level not federal.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, again a few more questions about, fishery management decisions. Do you think that most fishers in USVI understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: They use science and, do testing but at the same time, these fishers are like they're having like a record day on getting Bluefish and it's like, how can you tell us, we can't fish as many anymore? Or, there's one of those things of, well, once again, you can't tell us what to do because you don't do this every day for a living you just worked at an office so, some of them have had fights with them or advisers on the boats with them that they're doing but, I don't know there... I think most fishermen probably don't want, any interference from fish and wildlife or the management people.

Speaker 3: Okay. And then if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and fishers resolved? I know you gave us an example of maybe a physical way of solving it, but are there other examples where you've seen

Speaker 2: I don't know of any that like have gone to court or anything thing like that. In the past some shootings and things but... It could be fishermen things too I don't know. And I haven't written a paper where so-and-so Sue so-and-so over a conch area or something.

Speaker 3: And how about if there are conflicts between fishers and fishery managers, if they do exist, how are those conflicts resolved?

Speaker 2: Well it has to be done through enforcement depending on what the situation is.

Speaker 1: Interviewee, those are all the questions that we have on the questionnaire but if there's anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to add, please feel free and also if you can't think of anything right now and you want to email us or call us, at any time if there's anything that you would like to add, please let us know.

Speaker 2: Okay. I hope your studies continue on through or your research that we still have fish on the island, I don't know. I think like every year I always say, I wish we had a five year moratorium on reef fishing, and I've been saying that for a long, long, long, long, long time, but I don't know if it can ever happen or if there's a way to pay the fishermen to do other work, that would be awesome. We tried to train fishers to be boat captains because we got tourism here and it's cut this we need U.S Coast Guard licensed captains, but they went through the course and everything. But then when it came to the drug testing and stuff, they said "no, we're not going to do this." So I think that it was a Nature Conservancy that sponsored it so he spent time and money on them, but no it just didn't work. So there's got to be something else like I said, a lot of these guys are farmers as well, maybe supplement the farming or something, taking the pressure off the reef would be really nice.

Speaker 3: So do you think the tourists notice the changes?

Speaker 2: Oh yes. If I get people that have dove around different places, I think example like, in Cozumel their government's very strict about preserving the fish life for tourism, like a giant Parrotfish, like a Midnight, a Rainbow Parrotfish, it gets up to three feet long I mean, that's worth millions of dollars in tourism. For fishermen that's $2 a pound here, so protection of the animal life is you'll hear different things like well, and bone air or Cozumel, they say stuff. Yeah if he had the brand new diver that grew up in New York and their first time underwater is here or there just, their socks are blown off. That's all a part of diving in and breathing under water and seeing a live coral head or colorful fish and stuff. But as I said, it just, it hurts me some days just because I've been here so long, they're friends and I don't know if it... I don't think it could ever come back. I think The Nature Conservancy's dialogue or research on growing corals in nasty water and they're successful in doing that I get to bring back some of the coral life, but I don't know about the fish life I mean, if we did bring a ton of Parrotfish Spawn, so they get five inches long the fishermen are going to take the Parrotfish and the problem is they want a plate size fish and you know, how things have been going over the years where the plate is smaller now, if you're talking about Styrofoam or, the trays I'll let stuff, how they're getting smaller and smaller, like containers are getting smaller and so the fish are smaller set that plate. So how is that? I wish I had something good to say, but I still like diving we do see a lot of turtles still and sting rays and not inevitable.