Key Informant Interview 16 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Fisher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location: St Thomas

Speaker 1: Could you describe to us a little bit about your involvement with USVI fisheries?

Speaker 2: All right. My involvement. [...]I have 30 years of experience of commercial fishing. And I've been pretty much involved in everything that surrounds the fisheries for the last year or so. That's pretty much my background. Okay. I am a trap fisherman. And I fish in primarily coral reef fish, which consists around the different big fish that are managed by the council. And I do catch lobster also. I'm also a line fisherman, targeting the yellow tail and the blue runners. And I could do a little bit of diving, but not that much. I got two vessels. [...] That's full-time fishing. Before that, I used to go out with my dad and my grandfather and stuff like that. But I run my own business for the last 30 years.

Speaker 1: And does anybody else in your family fish?

Speaker 2: Not in immediate because I only have a sister.

Speaker 1: All right. So would you say that USVI coastal communities... And of course, you can speak for St. Thomas, St. John, but also if you want to add anything about St. Croix that you know of that's completely fine. We're just going to say USVI just in general. But you can speak from your experience. Would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries? The people here, the local people, they love fresh fish in their diet. They grew up with fresh fish and it has carried on as part of their ritual and culture. Over the years, the doctors tell you go away from the red meat, so fish has become a major role here in our fishery for the people of the island.

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

Speaker 2: Those that do it, yes. Because that's all they've done. In some cases, like myself, I work for the government for 20 years while still commercial fisher. But I wasn't one of the big hitters. I was more of a line fisherman during those 20 years. And very little traps. But the guys who do it... The big boys that do the trap fishing, that's all they do. So they depend on that. Without that, they could be in some serious problems.

Speaker 1: Okay. And would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2: Well for tourism, yes. Tourism, definitely. There are the people who come here to see the fish. Come here to see the different corals and other living organisms. So I would say, yes. And of course the fishermen need them for the fish.

Speaker 3: Right. Right. Okay. So, Interviewee. I was going to ask you what would you say are some of the major problems that are facing the fisheries in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: Wow, that's... Guys, we can be here about four or five hours. Well, there's a lot of issues with coastal runoff. There's a lot of issues with the permitting process. And are people allowed to deal around the shorelines? That's doing a lot of damage to the reefs. There's a lot of small mechanic shops that are dumping oils directly into the drains that are not being managed. We have a lot of the cruise ships and a lot of the cargo ships that damage the reefs by dropping their big anchors. There's so many different... I'm trying to think about the big ones. We had the issue with the sunscreen, but the law just went into effect, so that's good. So hopefully with some time, that's one of the items that'll be corrected.

Speaker 3: Okay. So if you had to rank them in the order of the one that you felt was the greatest problem, which one would you put as first, and second, and third?

Speaker 2: Well, coastal run-off would be number one. Enforcement, actually would be number one. They miss the enforcement, but [lack of/no] enforcement should be number one. Then coastal run-off. And then... Let's use a broad word and let's say sewage dumping. Because it's from oil. It's from the sewer pipes that the government don't manage properly. So sewage is broad. It covers a lot of... I can have a lot of branches from that tree.

Speaker 3: Okay. Great. Thank you, Interviewee. So sort of thinking again about changes over time. What would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the U.S. Virgin Island fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: I think one of the biggest problems is around the coastline because of all the sewage dumping. We had a stone in coral, but I wouldn't use that right now. But with all the coastal runoff and the sewage dumping, and that's upper management, the juvenile habitats around the island and inside of the marine reserves, the inshore marine reserve, they are stifling because... They are dying because there is no management to even... We have protections in place, there's no one going in and enforcing... People from docking and so forth. So that's what we've seen. We've seen major, major damage to the turtlegrass and the inshore reefs, like five feet [inaudible 00:14:13]. It's bad. Well, the corals. And like I said, from five feet in, they are dying. Algae is growing all over them. The turtlegrass is disappearing, so you're not seeing the juvenile [inaudible 00:15:06] beds anymore. Juvenile fish you've seen in certain areas, but where the pollution is so bad we lose fish. So those are the impacts.

Speaker 3: Okay. So, Interviewee. Have you observed any changes in the U.S. Virgin Island fisheries and or the environment that you think could be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: Every so often, we have coral bleaching. We just went through a small coral bleach episode. So we see that due to the water temperatures often. So it comes and goes. I don't know. Because we stay hot out here a lot. So you don't see a lot of changes like that. So I don't think the climate is effecting as we speak. What we have seen over the last two

in a half years since the hurricane [Maria] is we've seen a difference in tide changes. Tide flows. But that only has occurred since the hurricane. So we don't know why.

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

Speaker 2: No, I don't think so. Because from my experience, I haven't seen much of an effect from climate change. I have seen a lot of effect from the other stuff that we discussed.

Speaker 1: And in your opinion do you think that the U.S. Virgin Island fishery managers and researchers, or decision makers, are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I don't think that the carbon managers are concerned, especially the ones that look at the corals. So I do think so. Because they meet pretty much every week. So there is a lot of concern about what's going on. The way they are not focusing their efforts is on other issues that are effecting the reefs as discussed earlier.

Speaker 1: Now just a quick follow up question. Do you see the coral bleaching events directly affecting the fisheries that you do?

Speaker 2: No because it's happening in the inshore. Around the shoreline, 20 feet and shallower is where we're seeing this. Where we fish in way deeper. What it can be impacting is the juvenile habitat.

Speaker 3: So, Interviewee. I just wanted to clarify something with you. Just so I understand. You had said that the managers meet on a weekly basis to address some of the issues around the corals. But do you think they are focusing more on the climate than they are on the other issues that you discussed like pollution and run-off and sewage?

Speaker 2: No, I think that mostly they are discussing the stone and coral disease. That's their biggest focus right now. SCTLDs.

Speaker 1: And is that something that is concerning the fisherman as well, or not?

Speaker 2: Yes. It is a concern to the fishers.

Speaker 1: Okay. So changing a little bit our main subject, I'm going to ask you a couple of questions about just relationships between different groups of people. How would you describe the relationship between the fishermen in the U.S. Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: I think it's good. I mean, it's good.

Speaker 1: And is that true for everywhere or are there any differences depending on where you go in the Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: Oh, I'm speaking for St Thomas, St. John. [inaudible 00:21:46] St. Thomas, St. John, those I know. But a handful of fishers at St. Croix. But my opinion about that, they're not getting a word of what's going on. And I think they're lost in the [inaudible 00:21:48]. But I'm going to speak [inaudible 00:21:48] St. Thomas, St. John.

Speaker 1: So can you think of examples of the fishermen getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Yeah, well we have a Fishery Advisory Committee, also. And it's local. There's one in St. Croix. There's one here for St. Thomas, St. John. And we have members from recreational, commercial, diving. We have scientists. We have agriculture, DPNR Fish and Wildlife. So we have a large group of people. And concerns from other fishers are brought to that committee. And we discuss at that meeting. And it's a public... It's open to the public. So if fishers have concerns, they can come there and bring their concerns to the meeting. And if we don't have the answer there, then we go look for the answer. Outreach and education, I think we can use a lot more of that here. And all the islands. Because it's not happening. Only us four who attend meetings are bringing the word back to the fishers.

Speaker 1: And is the FAC in St. Thomas, St. John pretty active right now?

Speaker 2: No. Right now, it's dysfunctional. So the FAC, the last question was why. It fell apart last year. It fell apart last November. We had a series of meetings. We were actually doubling up on our meetings. And it was made clear that any letters or anything that was written needed to come through the entire board before being submitted. And there was a letter written to NOAA about the SCTLDs, the stone and coral disease. And it was sent without the group finalizing it. And everybody went pretty... So the chairman just sent in this resignation letter finally February 7th. So I spoke [inaudible 00:25:51] last weekend. He's supposed to be addressing it at our meeting that we're trying to hold next week, Monday. But I don't know if it will happen. Because he hasn't answered me yet. And at that meeting, he will be giving an update on what's going on. Because I told him, [...] I'm ready to move forward." "I'm ready to hold the March meeting." Without the [inaudible 00:26:18] for the March meeting, so I need to be there for the next meeting. So I'm going to keep the pressure on. But there's a lot of politics going on right now. The person [inaudible 00:26:31] no like the fishers. So it's been very tough for us.

Speaker 1: Okay. Yeah. So of course you already talked a little bit about this, but is there anything that you want to add in terms of describing the relationship between fishermen and fishery managers in the USVI?

Speaker 2: Right now I would say it's at an all-time low. It's the first time in 10 years that we don't have a working relationship with the president of administration. Last week I had a senator call me, Daryl, who is the Vice President of the Fisherman's Association. And we went to meet with Senator and we didn't know that he invited the Commissioner to be there. So we ended up in the same room, which was good. And we laid our case on the table. And that's when it was said, "Let's move forward." But every email, and every text, and everything that [inaudible 00:27:38] staff needed, hasn't gone anywhere. So I'm ready to call the Senator again and ask him, "Well, where are we going. Are we just going backwards again?" So we asked to meet with the Governor and let's get the ball rolling. But Nicole, one of the government... One of the government, Nicole Angeli, one of the government officials said all the fisherman are illiterate and stupid. It got leaked out. And the Senator asked the Commissioner if he heard about it and he admitted that yes, he heard about it. All the officials wanted Nicole fired. So that can explain you the relationship.

Speaker 1: Wow, yeah. So you talked, I'm assuming, mostly about the local government. Is there a difference in relationship with the local and the federal government, would you say?

Speaker 2: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. 16 years ago, we had the same problem with the federal government. It took us about four years, and we built a working relationship. And I would say right now, we have a very good working relationship with the federal government and its team players. Just that they're feeling the same pinch that we are feeling because they have lost a lot of communication with the president of administration, also. And I know that because they call me to answer questions for them. And I says, "It's not my job." I know the answers, but I said, "If I give you answer..." Then they will say, "Well, why did he answer that?" It's my answer, but Nicole is not answering them. She's not answering any emails. Commissioner's not answering his emails. But for us, the fishermen, I would say it's good. The scientists, or whoever set the meetings, so.

Speaker 1: I just realized that when I was asking you about the relationships between the fishermen, I skipped one of my questions. And it's a brief question. Do fishers... The fishermen there get together socially?

Speaker 2: Yes. They drink every times they have. The fishers, like in French Stone, the fishers here hang out together. Sometimes some of the guys from the north side will come down. That's where most of the fishers are. But they, every afternoon, at least half of them get together and go down [inaudible 00:30:48] and they are there drinking. And of course on Saturdays, every market... Every fisher and [inaudible 00:31:00] are drinking and talking among themselves. So they don't have a problem socializing and saying what they got to say. They will get it out.

Speaker 1: And so going back a little bit to the relationship between the fishers and the fishery managers. Are there any examples, specific examples, that you can think of fisherman and fishery managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Sure. What can I say? I would have to go back to the past administration. When Ruth was the director. We all got together and we discussed the whole island [inaudible 00:31:57]. We all worked at a very, very closely for the island [inaudible 00:32:02] management class. And that's why when it came time for public hearings, there were no issues. It wasn't like the SFA back in 2005 when we are 300 fishermen and families at the Windward Passage protesting the SFA. This time was a group of fishers. I was actually [inaudible 00:32:32] for that meeting. My representative went and it went smoothly. So. And that's where we've been. I begged last week. Me and Daryl begged the administration last week. Let's sit down and let's get whatever it is that's bothering them... Because we don't have any issue. Whatever it is bothering you guys let's get it and move on. We have a lot of work. We have a lot of work to do coming up. So I really, really don't know what's going to happen, but we're going to be at the same meetings.

Speaker 3: So Interviewee, do you feel that fishery management in the U.S. Virgin Islands is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2: I would say their decisions with our involvement have been fair. Any decisions with our involvement. Sometimes you don't know until it pops up. And then we challenge. So with everything that's going on right now that we don't know about, we will challenge. But all of the decisions that was made with the fishers' involvement... That's the whole key. The management that was not there 16 years ago. Decisions were being made by both federal and local government without the involvement of the fishers. All the fishers in the room. So now it's like you're working every project just [inaudible 00:34:29] we're doing the conception models. You're working it from the beginning with the involvement of the user groups.

Speaker 3: Right. So do you think it's fair for both local and at the federal level when fishers are involved?

Speaker 2: Yes, that's the best way to do it. I think that's the only thing to be done. I'm not saying that the fishers should get everything that they want. But I think that the managers, both local and federal, don't know the fishery like the fishers know it. And when we explain stuff, then they get to understand. And when making a decision, the decision can be made fairly.

Speaker 1: Right. And is there a difference between the federal and the local government? I think you already talked a little bit about this. But just to make it clear. Is there a difference between the local and federal government in how much they involve the fishermen and how fair the decisions are perceived?

Speaker 2: With the federal, like I said, we're completely involved in everything that's going on. Federal, we're involved in the [inaudible 00:35:43] process. And I'm involved in the [SD 00:35:46]. I'm involved in council. So we're involved in everything. And if anyone has questions, they will call. If I'm in a meeting, I'm representing the group. Let's use the SSC as an example. And I don't have the answer to the question. I don't make up an answer. I tell them, "Give me a few minutes." I step out of the room and I call the fisher or the fishers that have those answers. That's how we work among ourselves. I'm just their representative in the room. But they give me the information. Like the lobster fishery... I have questions about that, I call them. They will tell me. [inaudible 00:36:30], I call them. They tell me. The same fishery. Whatever it is, I will call and get those answers for them.

Speaker 3: Yes, okay great. So do you think that most of the fishers in the U.S. Virgin Islands understand how the fishery managers make their decisions?

Speaker 2: I think the real fishers... We have 109 registered fishermen. Out of that 109 registered fishermen, there's really only about 40 fishermen. The rest of them just register their boat for free by having their license. And the Commissioner said last week that he's going to fix that problem. So he says, "If they haven't fished for a certain amount of years, well then they don't plan to fishing again." So we tried to clean up that whole mess. But those are the big hitters. I think they understand the process a lot. Because our team brings the message back to those fishers. So between [Poni 00:37:52], who is the Vice Chair Council presently, Daryl, who is also on the district advisory panel, Winston Gregory, he's got another fisher there also, and myself, we carry all the information back to the fishers. And then there's one... Well, I should say, there's two individuals that are very good at fishing [inaudible 00:38:24] and Matt. And they are very good. They are very good because they are involved. And if a fisher has a question, they will explain it to them very carefully. So I don't know if you've had a chance to interview her yet, but.

Speaker 3: So, Interviewee. If they exist, how are conflicts between fishers resolved?

Speaker 2: Conflicts? Okay, let's use [inaudible 00:40:06] program as an example. There were some tensions. There were some tensions because you tried to explain the plan when it was created and everything, which took about seven years. And fishers in the community would spin everything that was being said. And then you have fisher [inaudible 00:40:33], "Oh well, why can he have traps and this one can't have traps. This one have a number." So when we had that issue, what we did was... It was [inaudible 00:40:45] or the Fishery Advisory Committee. I was not a member at that time. I was a member before. And then I became a member after again. So when there's issues with certain [inaudible 00:41:03] or wrecks, it's brought to the committee for clarification. That's because you have all the [inaudible 00:41:18] sitting at a table. You have a representative from the Division of Wildlife. Normally with them being there, they can explain it in a different language than they're explaining it. But you don't see that happening too often. I think the last time we had a big problem was for the trout reduction.

Speaker 3: Okay. So how do you feel if there's conflicts between fishers and fishery managers? How are those resolved if those exist?

Speaker 2: Hmm. Well you try to go to the higher up. And [inaudible 00:42:18] work it. We have requested four meetings with the governor and he has yet to entertain us. Right now, presently, it's a challenge. So what ends up happening is like what happened two weeks ago, I went on the radio. One of the... [inaudible 00:42:48] has a radio show. And he invited me on his radio show to talk about the issues that the fishers were having. So I was on the radio for an hour. And I let out everything. I've also been with concern the officially disaster money. That we still have that receipt.