Key Informant Interview 5 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Fisher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1: Some questions.... And like I said, we can keep this very informal if there's anything that you want to add as we're talking and also any questions that you would not want to answer, that's perfectly fine. We can skip any questions. So just to start a little bit, could you describe your involvement with USVI fisheries a little bit for us.

Speaker 2: I'm a commercial trap fisherman, and I do a little bit of line fishing. [...]. We catch mainly lobsters and some fish.

Speaker 1: And you are in St. Thomas, is that correct?

Speaker 2: That is correct.

Speaker 1: Okay. And Interviewee, would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2: I would say that, because, David Olsen way back when he was part of the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association, did a study, and after we lost the two dairies that we had here, St. Thomas Dairies and Trans-Caribbean, I mean, Island Dairies in St. Croix, with all the cows and all. I mean, farming went to like less than $2 million a year gross income, and fishing is like $10 to $12 million. That's his study. Now, I can't confirm is that correct or not, but he did a study.

Speaker 1: And so would you say that fishermen in the USVI are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 2: Yes. Because they'd have to go into something else like farming. The land here for farming is very hilly and small, and the water is very hard to get. So doing something else besides fishing, and I don't know what they'll do. They would have to get into tourism or sport fishing. If they can't do that, some older guys won't be able to, because of the age and captain's license and all that stuff.

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

Speaker 2: Absolutely. Because the tourists come here to see the fish, and snorkel, and swim, and dive and sail. So it's very important that we have a healthy coral reef system. And also for the fishermen, because if everything dies, then there's no more fishing. I mean, the fish will be driven away, or they just decrease in numbers where it's not worthwhile to go fishing anymore.

Speaker 3: Right. Okay. So Interviewee, this is Speaker 2. It's nice to meet you over the phone. And thank you again for agreeing to speak with us. I'm just going to ask you a few other questions. So the first one being, what would you say is, or are the major problems that are facing fisheries in the USVI?

Speaker 2: Well, we're a small island and most of our surroundings, our beaches and our lagoons. Not our beaches, but a lagoon area where you have most of our docks are taken up already, and their prices are so high. It's very hard to pay dock prices. That's why you got to keep raising the price of fish. Whereas in Puerto Rico, I've been all over Puerto Rico, and Puerto Rico helps the fishermen with docking, but they have a lot more room than we do. That is one area that I've talked about already, and other fishermen have talked about. If we had a backing area, especially for fishermen, where we only paid maintenance and water, something of that sort. It would help a lot where we didn't have to increase the price of fish or lapis all the time, to keep up with inflation or however you call it. That is our biggest, I would say, our biggest hardship when it comes to paying bills, besides insurance and the amount of things. But paying that dock bill, which I pay, in a way, is up to over $1200 just for dock, without water, and $150 a month just for water. But some people, on cheaper docks, need water to wash their boat. These guys that don't wash the boat. They ended up not going out half as much as I do, because they always broke down, because everything corrodes in the boats. You need water to rinse your boat off when you come in, and it needs safe docking. And that is a big thing. And if we had, where we would have to take our traps out of waters, with nowhere to put them, right? You would have to them home and that's like impossible. It's not that you have big areas where you can stack traps up. They're going to be smelly and stink, because of all the stuff that grew on them. Coral grows on all the traps after six months. Actually, you've got to scrape them off with a scraper. But it is what it is. We don't have that room here in the island in St. Thomas, especially on St. John. I don't know much about St. Croix. They're a little bit bigger, and they are a different kind of fishery, more diving. It's very efficient, but our trap system here would not work very good if we had to bring them in and where you'd have seasons, where you have to take the trap out of water. That's the biggest thing. So we've talked about it. And the fisherman here got some money from the federal government to replace the gears. The last two hurricanes that hit us back to back. But there's a lot more money left. And we suggested to the government to try to get a dock for the full time commercial fishermen, but I don't think it's going there. Maybe the next administration, they change it, and whoever campaigns, campaigns about doing that, because a lot of money still held back from that. We've got a whole pile of money. The government has it. I believe whoever did the one for Puerto Rico didn't do a good job, and they had to redo it to get money for the fishermen, because it wasn't enough. But Ruth Gomez and somebody else did the one here. I guess it was a Trump, what do you call it? They were empowered in. And they were the ones, at that time, after the hurricanes. So there was a lot of money left, that still can be used for the fishermen instead of sending it back or something of that sort. Where we could either buy an existing dock and just pay for maintenance and water. That'll help a lot. Let's say the government here, just tried to reopen and give licenses to more fishermen, which I think is a bad idea. But they say it's only going to be line fishermen or fishermen, whatever. But I don't know. I'm not sure, because they say one thing and do other things sometimes, because we had a trap reduction and I was a council member when we did that and we got it true and that saved our trap fishery for a while. Right? I don't how long it's going to fend off the environmentalists and all those organizations that are going to start, come back again, but we send them off for a while. We did, 20 years ago, whatever, you may went to two by two mesh and that sent them off for a while. And then we had our trap reduction, limited entry. So that's fending them off for a while, but it is what it is. Because I've been to other islands, and I see they still use a small mesh and I see the size of fish they bring in is very small. Yeah. And so what we did there is very helpful for fishery. And the size mesh especially, the juvenile fish too round, small. We don't catch goat fish anymore, because goat fish, I don't know if you know what a goat fish is. If you're from Puerto Rico, you might know. It's a fish that a lot of people eat. It lives in the grass. So we don't ever catch those anymore. Or the little silk, there's another name for them, the Vermilion or whatever they call them. It's a small little brown fish. Well, they're very plentiful inshore in the grass also, but we can't get either, because they go through the mesh. Only the big ones you catch off the edge, the drop, they live off the drop too, but they don't catch a lot. But that's fish that we don't catch unless you have a... The goldfish, I'm not sure you can catch them on the hand line. I'm not sure. You don't catch, but I know the guys do catch a lot silk when go yellowtail, trap fishing, and little grass beds and mounds and things for yellowtail or blue runners. They also float up like a yellowtail. They come up if the water's not too deep, and they interrupt the yellowtail fishing a little. Yeah. Yeah. So the fishermen don't like that fish. It's so small, you would catch a hundred and you're still not going to make any money. But people love eating them. Like me. I love eating them. They're very tasty. It's just hard to clean. The smaller the fish, the harder it is to clean.

Speaker 3: Interviewee you mentioned a couple of things, and I was just wondering. You had mentioned the dock issue, and you mentioned location to put your traps, and you also mentioned, again, the government increasing the number of licenses that they would be giving out to fishers for line fishing. Of those three, which would you say is the number one problem and number two and number three for fishers.

Speaker 2: I would say fish licenses would be one, if it's just line fishermen and maybe they only let five or 10 in every year. Okay. It's not a big problem. I won't see it as a major problem because line fishing is not going to beat the ocean so easy. You know what I mean? It's very hard because the weather is bad, half the year. So, not that you're going to grab a buoy, even though the sea is rough, but when you go to line fishing, it's a little different, more difficult. The current gets real strong. You drop your line here. It doesn't even reach the bottom until it's 200 feet up the hill. So it's a little more difficult than trap fishing. So it won't be an issue, but it'd be number one, if they really just let it go and everybody has licenses, whoever wants them. But if they let so many people in every year, it's not going to be a major problem. Because it's happening right now, where a lot of guys got out of the trap fishing business or they died. And either somebody bought the boat and the traps and got the license when they wrote the letter to the Commission, telling them, well, I'm buying this boat because he died and he's my uncle or something, that type of stuff. Right? They pass on the license to the mates, they pass on the license to the mates. So over years, a lot of people died and a lot of people retired and sometimes they pass the license and sometimes the people go into fishing and sometimes they don't, they just keep the license and do a little fishing once or twice a year. But they're not full time fishermen. Right? So I would say that's number one. And number two would be the dock. The dock, what do you call it? And somewhere I saw, they started a lobster nursery. I'm not sure where it was. Where, where, oh, the VBI. I saw that in a newspaper where they're starting a lobster nursery in BVI, they are breaking ground. Okay? And that is something I talked to Rick Nemeth at the UVI for many years. And we would help by bringing the eggs unharmed to close the shore where he would build these little things where the eggs can stick to them. What do you call it? The air conditioner filter. Eggs would go and end up in Florida or The Bahamas or wherever. Oh, I don't know. They're not sure what happens. I believe that they make a circle and they come right back with the current. That's what I think, but who knows? Because we have circular currents all the time. Right? It is going up then the current goes east, then it goes kind of Southeast and it regularly doesn't go much west, but that's the routine. So I think everything goes in a circle and comes right back. Yeah. If you know a little bit about currents around here. A low tide and a high tide. I've seen a lot of easterly, southeasterly currents that I haven't seen before lately. More than usual, but somebody said it's all over. It's not just here in the Caribbean. It's in Florida. Yeah. But I'm not sure what you call it. There's a name for it.

Speaker 3: Okay. So Interviewee, what would you say is or are the most significant changes that have occurred in the USVI fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Decades? Well, everybody's gone into more trap fishing because the lobster is a valuable creature. And we do have a lot of lobster, and a lot of people have gone into trap lobster fishing. More so than anything else. And also, when we had Hurricane Marilyn, that was '95. I'm way back there. Hurricane Maria and whatever the other one name was, Irma. Irma and Maria. Maria went straight to Puerto Rico, but we got hit by both, and we lost most of our traps in Maria. Irma was another time. Maria took everything from us, in the ocean. But after that, also, a lot of the seed, the grass beds all around the island, I believe were destroyed. And I don't know how long it's going to take to come back. And also the gravel, the dead coral that's all over the ocean. Right? Was moved on the ocean floor. Okay? And it went into caves well after it would hide and have safety. And it covered our traps where it buried them completely, and we couldn't even get them out from under the gravel. So imagine what it did to the ocean floor. So those are the two things that really... We've had a lot of hurricanes, but I believe with a west hurricane and east hurricane, it really shook up the bottom, the worst I've ever seen it. That time. So I haven't seen the fishery take a dip. The fishery is still pretty good. We are catching plenty of fish. Because of the protection of a high end bank and different things. But I've seen a dip in the lobster catch. Okay. Now, like I said, we found like 25 drops after the hurricane. And while we were fishing with them, we were catching as much lobsters as we would catch with 150 traps. So you understand the lobster had no place to hide. So they're out there in the open. No grass. A lot of the caves are buried up with gravel. And that gradually comes back when you have brown swells that moves everything. And like beaches here on the island, certain times of the year they are all rock. And another time of the year, they are all sand. You have sand. I don't know if you know some of that, but that happens here. We have sandy beaches that are sometimes rocky. You can't go on all rocky, no fun there. But then other times they're covered with sand. Especially down by Botany Bay. Sandy Bay is one of those I can say that does that. Yep. Yep. Yep. So things move. Sand moves and ground swells does a lot of things, and we had a huge ground swell, biggest I've ever seen in my life. After the hurricanes also, about, I don't know, it was couple of months after, sometime in early 2018, I believe. I don't know if you remember that. People would remember that size swell, and it did damage again. It rolled the traps up and buried them again. We've got like a third whammy. I'd never seen anything like that. The swells were so huge. It was unbelievable. I haven't seen one since then that big, but that one was major big. I can't remember what month. I think it was early 2018, if anything, but it was the biggest swell I ever saw. I thought we had 14 and 15 feet swells. And when you get 60 feet of water, 100 feet of water and the ocean breaks at that depth. So anywhere out in the ocean, you had 100 feet of water, I'm sure you had 14 foot waves breaking in the onshore. And like I said, the gravel moves about, and it crawls all the time. When you have big swells, it moves. It's a natural thing, but I guess with the hurricanes, it's not as natural. And a lot of this has been said already. I'm not saying, I've never said this already, but of this stuff that has been said already, just like the runoff. If you cut the land and you have big rains, the ocean turns brown with mud. And sewage, and then you have a little bit, sometimes I think it's in 2005. I'm not sure we had a real, still summer, like no wind. And it made the ocean very warm, and you went and some beaches that didn't have real good currents, it was like a sauna. Yeah, yeah. 2005, if I'm not sure. Different things happening because of the weather, I'm sure this is not new to the whole existence of the world. I'm sure every 100 years things start to do different things. Now I'm not saying that we are not helping along by polluting it, but I think we do have changes in the way of the world. Everything happens. It's not just the pollution, does it.

Speaker 3: Right. I was going to ask you. My next question was to ask you what would you say are some of the most significant environmental changes that have occurred in the USVI in the last couple of decades? And I think you addressed a few of them already. And I was wondering if you had any others that you wanted to share?

Speaker 2: No, like I said, I grew up here. I was born in St. Thomas and we used to skin dive when I was young in school. It was like a weekend thing, we would all skin dive and air fish. And then I had a couple traps when I was in my early twenties. And when they built Mahogany Run, they shoveled so much mud into the ocean that I couldn't hold the rope to pull the traps up. It was so slippery with the sticky mud on it. Yep. And the same thing with Botany Bay at one time when they turned some soil down there. It got real bad down there too, and that's more recent, in the last 10 years. So we had a lot of mud in our traps down there. The west of the island. So that happens when you turn mud, but what happens after is that if swells come, it lifts the mud up, and it's particles in the water, it turns the water brown, and the current carries it out, and it drops further out in the ocean. So if you go far enough out, there's mud out there in different spots, it's a very barren area. There's not much fish that live there, but that's natural, I think. There're muddy bottoms in certain places in the ocean. Especially where there's no current, much current and different things. I don't know. It is what it is. That's the natural habitat, I believe.

Speaker 3: Okay. Great. Thank you. Okay. So my next question is, have you observed any changes in the USVI fisheries and or the environment that you think may be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: I don't know. I can't tell you. We've had more hurricanes. When I was a kid, we didn't have a hurricane for my whole childhood, until Hurricane Marilyn, I think, no Hurricane Hugo in 1989 was the first hurricane I ever saw. And I was almost 30 years old, like 25 or 30 then, so that was the first hurricane I had ever seen. We have close calls where we shut down everything, but the hurricane just made a turn and we didn't- But it seems like the hurricanes are taking a different path, sometimes la nina, el nino, whatever you call it, it pushes them more south. We're just unlucky. If you're in Hurricane Alley, like we are, you have got to be always ready. Because, if it misses us by 50 miles, we're lucky, but 50 mile difference makes all the difference. If it's a big hurricane, if you don't get in the circular, you won't get a lot of damage. I find the hurricane did a lot of damage to mangroves, killed a lot of mangroves. Wiped them clean. I've never seen that before, and my boat in Mandahl Pond, I put my bow touching the mangroves and had two stone anchors, and I had like three or four ropes to the mangroves. You know, the biggest ones I could find. Guess what? They all were laying down going east because of, in Mandahl Pond, because of Hurricane Irma. So now we take the boat out two weeks after Hurricane Maria comes, you got to go back in there. You don't know what to tell yourself. And then all of a sudden, Maria rips them up, lifts them up, pushes them forward, but not as strong, because most of the bush are gone already. They don't have anything but the limbs and the trunk the wind to hold them now. All the bushes are gone already. So the mangroves took a real hit. Those hurricanes are the worst I've ever seen.

Speaker 1: Wow. Just a quick question. So you were talking about the impacts of the hurricanes, and it sounds like you're saying, you're seeing more and more intense hurricanes. Right? I think you talked a little bit about how they impacted the bottom and also the mangroves. Could you talk a little bit more about how, in your view, they are impacting the fisheries, more specifically?

Speaker 2: Well, like I said, I didn't see a big decrease or any decrease in the fish. We still trap a lot of fish, but I saw a decrease in the lobster. The lobsters have a decrease. I don't know in the nursery or whatever, and I would say, I mean, they have all this money and, and look at the toll at BVI, they started a lobster nursery. That may help us too, because they're right there, a couple of miles away.

Speaker 1: And is there anything else related to climate change that you think is impacting the fisheries?

Speaker 2: We used to have more rain. We have less rain. So that doesn't impact the fishery, which if anything, it helps, because the water doesn't run into the ocean as much with dirt. So the bad thing about not having much rain, but when you have a lot rain now, it really runs, but we haven't been having as much rain as we used to have. So, okay. If you've got a lot of muddy water going into the ocean and that hampers the coral reef, because it settles on it, and if there is not any ground swell to take it away, eventually it will kill it, too. A fisherman, if we break a coral, fine, it's going to grow back, because the piece of coral we didn't kill it, but we broke a piece of coral off. When the mud goes in it and the sewage and all the warm water that kills it forever. So we proved that already. This has been said already. Because we had meetings with all these people and there are things that were said. They had us as number one, and we are number five now, or go by different things in front of us that is destroying the coral before they reach the fishermen.

Speaker 3: And Interviewee, would you say that the waters aren't warming?

Speaker 2: I don't see that per se. Like I said in 2005, I saw that. I don't know what's causing the weed to come in from wherever it's coming from. I remember reading an article about it, but I can't remember what it said is causing it, and it's not going to change or anything like that. I don't know if it's a temperature or water making the weed grow, but what that is causing is toxins to build up in the mangroves and boy, in the hatcheries, if there's any left. So that's that? I don't know why that's happening or I read the article, but I don't remember half, some shit, you can't keep everything in your head. But I read an article and why it had it. I read that article, but I can't remember if it's climate, is it warmer waters, like you said, or something of the sort. So you have more of that weed, and when it goes into a hole and it can't come out, it rots and it causes toxins. In some places in St. Thomas, the boaters had to leave like [inaudible 00:32:18] because it was destroying the boats and the engines. Because the toxins, it ate the metal. All the coolers, when they suck the water in and go through the coolers and all that, it just rotted them to hell and they had to leave. I know guys left there, and they said they would never go back, because it costs them so much money to repair the boats. It is what it is. When I've seen that stuff, I see fish once in a while, swimming in it. But you know where I am at, American Yacht Harbor. When you were there late in the evening or early in the morning, you look, you're trying to light all along the mangroves and see baby lobsters coming out of there. So that's why I'm trying to say the nurseries are being destroyed. That's part of the situation, I believe. I can't tell you to say that the lobster we have here comes from somewhere else, but I don't believe that's all true. The thing, I think, it goes in a circle and comes right back. But that's what they say, anyway, we get our lobster from South America, this and that. And I don't know. But you figure that the, what you call it, that weed or whatever it is, would help bring more lava towards us. I don't know. I can tell you, I don't know how that works.

Speaker 1: Okay. So Interviewee, in your opinion, are US Virgin Island fishers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I'm sure they are, because if it is destroying the fishery and the environment, I'm sure you would be. But our small islands, we have a lot of current that runs and that's the thing that's saving us. It doesn't, the water, doesn't stay stagnant. And anywhere you got current running strong, you have vibrant bottoms. The bottoms are very healthy, because the current brings nutrients. So now in the south drop of our island, you got 2000 feet of water, 1000, and it goes to 2000, 1200 real quick, 1000. So you have that cold water when the current goes coming from the south now, running up and coming on top of the shallow water. You understand what happened in there. So you got these nutrients coming up from the deep, it's cold. So I don't know what effect that has on the bottom, but I think it's all natural in the way it happens. So that's why we have a good fishery, and the same thing in the night, you'd have the cold water coming up from the depths when you have this current. I don't know how much the current moves way down. I know it doesn't move as much, but I'm sure it does move a little bit. You've got those currents just ripping up from the deep and you are on the edge. You can see how strong it gets there. I think buoys, if you had it trapped there, just buoys disappear, because the current sinks the buoy, because it's so strong. And then when it changes, it slacks up a little bit, the buoy float back.

Speaker 3: Okay. All right. So in your opinion, are US Virgin Island fishery managers, and researchers, and decision makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I have no idea. I mean, I believe a body's concerned about climate change in one way or the other. If it's really happening, I can't tell you. I'm not a scientist. I can tell you all the changes I've seen happening, but sure, we went through the Ice Age, we went through all kinds of different ages, I don't know what happens.

Speaker 1: So Interviewee, I have a couple of questions about relationships, between different stakeholders, different people. How would you describe the relationship between fishers in the USVI and the fishing communities?

Speaker 2: I would say it's pretty good. It's not terrible. We don't have people burning one another's boats. A lot of places that happens, still. Right. Growing up, it happened too, but smaller boats, the net fishermen would get angry at one another and burn one another's boats with the nets inside. Before, when I was a young kid, there's mainly net fishing, catching the yellow tail and the quiraing, the bar jacket and the hard nose, and the gar, that type of fish, bonitos. When they come in close, you throw your net, but you have a lot problems with that, because people would get angry if you are in their spot. And I know they burned one another's boats, but I haven't seen much of that lately, the last 15, 20 years, because people know what's going on. And we're not a real big fishery. They may have some jealousy going on when one fisherman does real good and the other one doesn't.

Speaker 1: Right. And can you think of any examples of the fisheries getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Oh, yeah. Many times. I mean, I've been in from the trap reduction limited, all that we did, we started all of that stuff we started. The fishermen at St. Thomas Fishermen's Association, we've done many things together. Many times. I mean, we've had fundraisers, ball games. When we were in full swing then to raise money, the meetings and all that stuff. We used to have a pamphlet out when Olsen was there, what you call it, pamphlet every month. You know, St. Thomas Fishermen's Association pamphlets. And all that. I don't know if what you call it, is still up, the website, the St. Thomas Fishermen's Association website. So there's a lot of pictures in there and all. I don't know if the magazines that were put out every month are still there, but all that used to be done. It's also left, and it had hurricanes there. Everybody had a tough time after the hurricanes. Things have bounced back a little bit, and it is what it is. But fishermen did come together for a lot of stuff.

Speaker 1: Okay. What about socially, do the fishers in the communities that you fish get together socially as well?

Speaker 2: On occasion. On occasion, they meet at the watering hole, I would say, you could call it, and have drinks and talk. And then, after a couple of drinks, the fish will get three times the size. That's about it. I'm just saying, there are different bars and little groceries they have. They stop and have a drink, and there's a lot of fishermen, see other fishermen, he's going to stop and have a drink. And when they fish, they all line up the trucks together. So they are in one area. Okay. On a Saturday it happens a lot here, and it'll be posts of pictures of the farmer's market and the fisherman selling also.

Speaker 1: And how would you describe the relationship between the fishers and the fishery managers in the USVI? And if it makes sense to differentiate the state or local, sorry, government and the federal government.

Speaker 2: The problem with every time you have a new administration, they change the lady who runs Fish and Wildlife, who's in charge of the fisheries there. Everybody comes in there and they have a different perspective. I was in a council, and they went through four different fishing managers while I was there. And every time they asked me to show them around the fishing and all the fish, especially on a Saturday. I would introduce them to the fish. I got tired of doing it, because it was like every six months they changed them. It was a weird thing. At that time, you went through a lot. One was Mueller. One was another guy that they brought in from the states. I mean, it was a lot of them, a lot of them. Every time they have a different administration, but even before that, you'll see changes. And sometimes some of the fishermen don't agree with what they're doing. So there's a lot of hostility right there. If they don't agree with whatever's happening, like right now about the licenses. There's a little bit of hostility going on there right now. I see that with the local here, and they have come to trust the federal part of it a little bit more. Because, at first, people didn't associate with the fishermen, they just wanted to make rules, and the fishermen never came to the meetings and never participated in anything. So they come up with set of people who going to make rules. So you never saw them or talked to them. Now everything has changed. They involve the fishermen in every decision they make, and everything that's being done, any studies, so that's a good thing. So we are involved if you want to be involved.

Speaker 1: Interesting. Yeah. And so can you think of any examples of fishers and fishery managers getting together to address an issue? And this could be at either the local or the federal level.

Speaker 2: It happens all the time. I mean, when we did that trap reduction program. You had to deal with the local government to get it in place and write a law and have it in place. So because of the federal government, so you'd have it match and so it was a limited entry. So we have so many fishing tags and then there's no more. The local had to work with the federal and us, it was a three prong thing, with people out on the committee who decided how to go about having a trap reduction program, which we had a guy, Tony LaRichi from the Keys came out and helped us start it out. And he gave pointers, and he was to the meetings we had. And every week we'd have a meeting to discuss and get. And then we had hearings with a local committee, I forget, FAC, here. And we had meetings, and they went out there. We had problems, and where everybody had their own plan, and they wanted to reduce it. But at the end of the day, we stuck to our plan, and it got passed. Actually, I was one of the persons who stayed in the end when everybody argued and didn't want to come back on the committee, they argued and just stayed out of it. And I wasn't a member. I went back and helped. It's weird. Yeah. It was a little bumpy there, and then way back, I wasn't involved in it as much then, but when they went to two by two mesh that was a good thing that was done. And I'm sure it had the council, the local government and everybody involved and all the fishermen. And I was involved in a lot of stuff that happened when I was a council member. We had to get quotas in place, every fish and in lapis and everything. For those six years, I was a council member. I didn't say a lot. I just listened a lot more, but I was involved in that whole process of getting quotas, and I started a trap reduction with a letter for the commissioner here and one to Crabtree. I was the one that wrote the first letter with help from Ruth Gomez. I sat down and wrote out the letter. I still have the letter actually. The bolder one went to, I guess, we presented it in a council after I gave it to the fisheries manager here, whoever it was at the time and the local government. And we got a committee going. The council paid for where we kept the meeting and helped with everything and all that stuff. Get it done. So a lot of times, we all have to come together and work. And now we are changing. We having our own. We're dividing up the fishery where St. Croix, St. Johns, St. Thomas and Puerto Rico are going to have their own. It's not going to be one flat for everybody. If they have a problem with their lapis fishery, well, you close it down. It's not going to be like you are going to close down the whole fishery for Puerto Rico, St. Thomas and St. Croix. It's going to be all divided now. For all the rules and regulations are going to change a little bit for each one. We've got different sectors, St. John, St. Thomas, St. Croix and Puerto Rico are going to all have their own thing. They're working on that right now. I'm part of it, but you keep hearing the same thing over and over, over and over. And one, you answer questions over and over again with the same answers. Absolutely boring.

Speaker 3: So, Interviewee, do you feel that the fishery management, in the USVI, is it fair in the decisions that they make and I guess you could even distinguish between the local and the federal?

Speaker 2: You know, it's been all right. It's the top person, usually the top person who's in charge that really causes the issues. You understand? When they keep people and a new person comes in who doesn't know none of the fishermen, never met them, and that's what happens.

Speaker 3: At the local level or the federal level?

Speaker 2: This person works for the local, but is being paid by the federal, I believe. But it's a Fish and Wildlife Director. And Assistant Director, those two. So you get new people that went to school to be a biologist and a scientist, and they come here, and sometimes they're not welcome. Like the lady that's there now, I don't have a beef with her really, because I've talked to her maybe once or twice briefly, but other people in the St. Thomas, like Julian McGrath and others have had big beefs and Ruth Gomez. And beefs in the way she does certain things. So I may agree with them, in certain aspects, but not everything they fight about. But, Yeah. Because when we started the official organization, we had a ban on gill nets and they stopped gill nets in St. Croix, St. Thomas and St. John from being used. Okay? They paid the fishermen who had gill nets for the gill nets and maybe gave them a little bit of money to try to start fresh. So whatever else, line, a different kind of issue. But then Olsen say he was going to reverse that ban. And I told him, no instance, I'm agreeing with that. They looked at me and they said, "Sorry, we are going forward." I say, "You are fighting a losing battle. Let's fight a battle we can win." And they didn't listen to me. And they went full speed ahead. I quit a job over that. And that was dead. We even talked about it again, but listen to me, he could have gotten a lot more accomplished, because he was really a guy who could accomplish shit. He bought a boat for Fish and Wildlife that they never had before, a big trap boat. He did a lot of stuff. You know, he did studies, many studies of events, fish events. He did a lapis study. He did a lot of stuff when he was there briefly, the brief time he was there, actually. He did a lot of stuff. I mean, he didn't get along with the guys in the federal government sometime and the local government. Because sometimes, he would take his recognition back. One time he just didn't take it back.

Speaker 3: So Interviewee do you feel the federal government is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2: In some instances, I'm not agreeing with when they took south of St. John just like that out without anybody in interaction with it. You remember when Bill Clinton was there or whoever it was, he just gave a whole swath of land, sea bed, south of St. John to the national park. And they just made it a national park. And we had no say in that. I mean, I hear of them doing it, presidents doing it all over the world. But when you affect people, that's a whole different problem. You have no say. They just come and take it from you. That was wrong, and they didn't take federal waters. They took local waters. You understand what I'm saying, because that was three miles away from the land he took. Now waters is three miles after land. We only have three miles of local water that local government is responsible for. But he took the three miles inshore and not the federal waters that he owned, fish. So, totally wrong. I don't mind protecting fisheries, like the Hein bank anywhere that has a spawn in the area, I would say 100% protected. Shut it down, but just don't take a swath of sea and just say, sorry. You can't for no reason.

Speaker 3: So do you think most fishers in the US Virgin islands understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: I think some of them do now, some of the older guys do not. I know it goes and it's a whole process, and they do studies sometimes. And the studies aren't right, because of the type of fish. People go, and just throw a line off a boat and expect to catch fish. You have to be a professional to do that. Not just a body with a hand in line and hook. So, a guy did a study, what is it, his name? I don't think he's going to come back this way again because he kind of rubbed people wrong. His name, he had a ponytail. I can't remember. You might know him, but I don't know if he does any work for the federal government anymore. He did a study in St. Croix on fish, and I told him if he came here, and I'd show him how to catch fish, but he never came. I show them how to catch fish by using a rapid not a passive way. Fresh bait your traps. And you can haul in the same gear the next day. That's rapid catch, but now you have the passive where a fish will go in and another fish will see another fish will go in, that type of thing.

Speaker 3: right. Okay. So my last question is if you think that it does exist, how are conflicts between fishers and other fishers resolved?

Speaker 2: You go to the DPR, which is the department, the police that's over us. Traps and trap boats. And they're the police of the ocean for local waters, DPR. And ones that if you see somebody hauling traps or you catch them hauling traps or of that sort, they're the ones who has to take care of that. Or they catch you with an illegal fishing boat or illegal lapis. Two fishermen having a fight, they just have bad blood and that's it. If they don't have any evidence to take the other fishermen to court or to have him investigated, it is just the same. Different circumstances all the time. Every event is different.

Speaker 3: Right, right. Okay. How about conflicts between fishers and fishery managers? How do you think those are resolved?

Speaker 2: Well, you go to meetings and you express your anger, the way you think it should go about happening when they have meetings. Follow scope in meetings. When they're going to come down with a new rule or, but they have to have scope in meetings before he just... I believe the president can have a rule anytime he wants, but I'm talking about the regular, the right procedurally.

Speaker 3: Interviewee, these are all our formal questions. This is amazing. Thank you so much for all this fantastic information. I was just curious as to what part of St. Thomas do you normally fish from?

Speaker 2:

My boat is moored in American Yacht Harbor, the eastern most part of the island. It's right here where every dock goes in St. John. I get the fuel from a fuel truck right close to that. So that's the main reason I'm still there with the price, because I can get the fuel 60 or 70 cents cheaper from the truck. If I go somewhere else, I got to buy it from the dock, and it's going to kind of even out right now, it's even, and out. So I go somewhere else, it's going to cost say more for fuel and less for dock. So it's not going to really help. Or pull at a discount rate where I'm at from the truck from Fire Island. And that's why I'm really there right now. I actually, for all the years I've been fishing and I had a boat that's like a bass whaler, something bigger. I used that. The only time I was away for about a year and a half, I was in another marina. But for over 25 years or 30 years, when I have bigger boats, I've been in that marina. I was going up every year.

Speaker 1: Wow. So altogether, you've been fishing in St. Thomas for about 30 years?

Speaker 2: Well, I would say professionally in that range or more, but I've been fishing all my life. Part time, sport fishing, yeah. I grew up so close to the ocean. I fished with my brother when I was young. I used to go with him all the time out. I loved fishing. Actually my father was a farmer all his life. He did a little bit of fishing, but not much, but I know everything about farm, about animals too. Because I grew up on a farm with cows, sheep, goat, pigs, chicken, everything. I know a lot about farming, but there's no place for that here now. The land is so valuable. It's so expensive.