Key Informant Interview 8 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Fisher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 2: [...] I don't remember if it's been that long, but it's been a pretty long time, and then I was a member of the DAP, and traveled over and sat on a few council meetings here and also in Puerto Rico. And I think Roy Crabtre was there at the time, and so sat in on a few of those and just trying to get a perspective on what's going on, but I've been involved [...] here for a while and we're trying to work out issues specifically for St. Croix, and then also during the island specific management plan for St. Croix St. Thomas St. John, but we're kind of splitting things up, St. Thomas St. John together and in St. Croix separately. The reason we did that is because the shelf system is so much different here than it is over there. Regulations and practices that would work well over there just don't apply over here because we have such a small shelf, so things of that nature, trying to revise and update some of the USVI codes so that it works with the newer regulations that we're putting out. And then the federal compliance has always been a big issue, we're working on that, trying to get the catch report, the ACLs [inaudible 00:04:29], but we can get a reasonable ACL information so that we can satisfy the federal all government's requirements for being in compliance for that, and there a lot of that too. [I fish] Recreationally and commercially. A lot of times I'll go out with the kids and just fish for fun, but if I'm coming out fishing with my buddy a few months ago and just with the kids trolling around having a good time on the west end, nice and flat, and found some birds offshore and ended up with a really nice [inaudible 00:05:11] and so results. Hold on, [inaudible 00:05:15] sure. So we sold the fish and made some money and cover the cost [inaudible 00:05:22] boat for the day. So a lot of my fishing is similar to that. On occasional I'll go out specifically for commercial, but a lot of times it's just happenstance or we happen into a decent fish, I can fill my refrigerator and still have leftovers. Definitely, it makes it a lot more affordable, to own or rent a boat when you can make some money. I don't do any charters at all. Usually I drag the kids along and my friends and their kids and that type of thing, so I get the younger generation into it.

Speaker 1: So would you say in your or opinion that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2: Well, I guess comparing to Puerto Rico, they aren't quite as isolated communities as you would find over there. So when you say coastal communities, I mean, we've got two towns, both of them are on the water. Right? And I would say that, yes the community is definitely dependent on the fishermen. And I say that because a lot of the restaurants in town depend on the fishermen for the catch. They're fresh catch of the day, as far as smaller communities in and amongst the island, yes. I would say the commercial fishing community is small enough that you could consider it one community, and there's people that are dependent solely on that for their income, and spent a lot of time and a lot of effort to try make a living doing just that. So, yes, the fishing is definitely a very important part.

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

Speaker 2: Yes. I would say the majority of them are very dependent on the fishery. I would say there's, and I don't know for sure. DPNR would be the people I've talked to get the specific numbers on number of full-time versus number of part time, but I would bet that most of the fishermen are full-time.

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

Speaker 2: Yes, right now, yes. And I'll tell you why, I may get to something somewhere to this later, but right now the fishermen are struggling because they're more dependent on flying fish close to shore, and the reason is since... God, I can't even remember when it was last, when we had a FAD in the water, but FAD program for the USVI has fallen off a cliff. It's horrible. There've been promises after promises, after promises of putting FADs back out in the water. And there used to be a very robust, very effective FAD program around St. Croix. Around St. Croix there was one, two, three, four, either six or seven FADs, between six miles offshore and 19 miles offshore. And what that did, is you have a community of fishermen that will get [inaudible 00:09:33] around island, and they will go offshore of these FADs and they will fish the FADs, and they will put 90% of the fishing pressure on the FADs, and since the FADs are gone, all of that fishing pressure is now back on the reefs. They [the FADs] were not maintained properly and they broke free. And then DPNR dropped the ball and they didn't keep up their permitting, and so now they have to go and I'm, according to them, it's all been done. But you know, this has been over a decade. We have been without that. And it's because they lost their army [inaudible 00:10:15] of engineers permit. So all of that had to go through again, they had to do soundings, they had to do all kinds of elaborate stuff to get these permits back. And so, unfortunately, because they were not paying attention and they dropped the ball on this, the fishermen are suffering, and also the reefs are suffering because now they're focusing on fishing on the reefs, and so there's more pressure where there doesn't need to be, the fishing around St. Croix when it comes to the reefs is very limited because we have very deep water, very [inaudible 00:10:50]. And so it's easy to put a lot of pressure on the reef, because there is not a lot of room. The north shore I would say at least half the length of the island drops off to thousands of feet of water within a half a mile of shore. And so you have a very small shelf that is being pressured by all these fishermen because they don't have anywhere else to go.

Speaker 1: Right, and is the local government in a process of re obtaining those permits or is that not?

Speaker 2: DPNR says that they have... I mean, Nicole, I don't know if you know Nicole or not. She's super sweet and she's been very diligent about it, but it's never come to fruition, and we're waiting on this. We got permits for that, we're building this or it's everything's over in St. Thomas. We got to wait. It's been wait and wait and wait and delay and delay and delay. And there were supposed to be two FADs dropped in March. Those were the first two FADs that were going to be put, real FADs put back in the water in over a decade, and we'd still have no FADs in water, and I honestly believe that if you can put this FAD program back together and maintain it the way that it was maintained in the past, that you would relieve a ton of fish pressure off of the reefs of the island on top of that, you would be able to provide a way more effective way for these local fishermen to make money without much effort, the return on effort would be remarkably better for them. But it never seems to be a priority, and it's really frustrating as a fisherman, and now as a commercial fisherman. You start to lose faith. Like past sure, yeah, next month, oh yeah, sure, this summer for, oh yeah. Well maybe in the fall, it's just been year after year after year of promises and no delivery. So anyway, as far as reefs are concerned, yes, they're very important, but they're suffering.

Speaker 1:Okay. Yeah. And so you are already talking about a major problem facing the fisheries, but what would you say, are there any other major problems that are facing the fisheries in the USVI right now? And what would you say are these major problems?

Speaker 2: Just the economic problem right now. The fishermen took a pretty big hit when the refinery closed because we pretty much lost the middle class in St. Croix. We had a large group of people that were making enough money that could go out and eat out two or three days a week, and could afford the $30 fish shop. And so the fishermen had a lot more turnover of their catch because there were a lot more restaurants. And also the restaurants that were around were using a lot more fish, because they were selling a lot more fish. And so between the refinery closing and in the economic downturn that followed that the fishers took a big hit, financially because there's just not the demand there used to be. We've been talking to the council extensively about this because as they're setting ACLs and what they were doing was- They found what they were doing is they were basing ACLs on I think it was a two or three year stretch, what the annual catch was. And we were explaining to them you can't base these catch reports base this information going forward using the stress, the years of information that you have because it's dramatically reduced. The catch is dramatically reduced, not because the fishery is suffering, but because there's no sales. And so if fisherman's not going to go out and catch a thousand pounds of fish and spit on his freezer for nine months because he can't sell it. So we had this big, long discussion with them and I think they stretched out the years, they were going to use to determine the annual catch limits because of the economic downturn and because of the way that that affected the fishers. If you looked at it just on a data standpoint, you would see the fishery crash, because all of a sudden, we're catching all these fish, catching all these fish and then over the next 30 years, there's half as many fish being caught. Well, not because the fishery crashed, it's because the economic situation on the island crashed and then nobody's buying fish. And so we had to make that adjustment, or ask the council to make that adjustment, and they did fortunately they saw the light, but I would say that right now, especially compounded with what's going on with COVID-19 is definitely putting a hardship on the fishers.

Speaker 1: Okay. And so mentioned the FADs and the economic downturn, the refinery, if you were to rank in terms of importance these major problems, how would you rank them?

Speaker 2: I would say the economic downturn would be first, just because it doesn't matter how good the fishing is. We can have 20 FADs and we can have tons of Fisher on this island. If you don't have anywhere to sell them, then it doesn't do any good. So as far as the fishers are concerned, the economic situation is number one. That has to be the biggest thing is how it affects their pocketbook. And then after that the fact that we don't have these spots that we can go and fish offshore, you go out and you look for what you can find and if you get lucky, you get lucky. But when we had these FADs around the island, there were five or six specific points where you could go and look for fish, when you had a good spot to find fish, and they were spread around the island enough, so that you've got a launching point on south shore, you've got a launching point on west end, you've got a launching point on north shore, or two launching points on north shore, salt river, and Christians said, because fishermen could put in the water and go out and they could spread their effort out, and still it's not like there's one FAD one place and everybody's going there. FADs were spread out around the island, and so there were multiple different locations that you could get to without having to run too far from pretty much every side of the island that you from. So I think if that got put back into place, I think that would make a huge difference to the fishers.

Speaker 1: Okay And you also some changes, but what would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in USVI fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Well, I would say component the trap reduction plan, I think, affected the fishers a lot. Yeah. I think that definitely had a big effect on them, and that coincided close to the implementation of East End Marine Park, and East End Marine Park, I think is a good thing for the island as a whole, but unfortunately the people that put these in Marine park together did disservice to the fishermen. They didn't follow through on what they said they were going to do. And it's really soured the fishermen to the East End Marine Park. My understanding is they're the cooperation piece in Marine park was fine, we will give up all the in days to no fishing. We'll fish outside the reefs, you guys can keep the in days for no take, that's going to help the small fish become big fish and so on and on. So the only thing we ask is that we can still come in and get big fish [inaudible 00:20:14] come in, throw the nets, catch the spread, put them in the [inaudible 00:20:17] well, go offshore to the FADs and catch the fish that we're going to sell away from the island, away from the reef, when East End Marine Park brought their rules, they cut the fishermen out of that and said that there was nowhere inside, in these, in bays that they were going to allow them to take big fish. That really soured the relationship between the fishermen and the East End Marine Park, and so that affected them because that's a large portion of the island that they cannot go to get scrap, and it happens to be a very good part of the island that holds a lot of big fish.

Speaker 1: Yeah, that makes sense. And what would you say in your opinion is the most significant environmental change that has occurred in the USVI in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: I'm not sure how the storm in 17 [inaudible 00:21:28], I have not been on the south shore offshore enough to see if that has destroyed much of the reef was close enough for shore, and it was definitely strong enough that it could have broken up a lot. So I'm sure that that has an effect. I was here for [inaudible 00:21:43] in 89 and saw what [inaudible 00:21:47] did to the reef, it looked like somebody took up bulldozer and just drove over, and so that was a huge effect on health of the reefs. And so I would say that the storm probably financially affected them pretty heavily well as environment. Everything I've seen, which is primarily where the diving is in pretty good shape, but that was also the lee side of the island, as much as it could be because the storm passed out.

Speaker 1: Could you repeat the last part. You were breaking up a little bit. Would you say?

Speaker 2: I was saying the north shore where I have been doing primarily all of my diving since the storm looked like it's done pretty well, but I have not been on the south shore to see the effects of storm on the reefs there. The eye of the storm went south of us. So I imagine the south shore took the burnt.

Speaker 1: Okay, and are there any other environmental changes that you have observed in the time that you've been fishing?

Speaker 2: The only thing that has really struck me that actually is a positive, is that the long spine sea trends have come back. They were absent for a long time after [inaudible 00:23:08] and they've come back. They've pretty well established themselves the way that I remember them being there, and so that's great having back, even the reefs is clean.

Speaker 1: And have you observed any changes in the USVI fisheries and, or the environment that you think can be attributed to climate change?

Speaker 2: There has been a significant, more larger amount of sargassum coming ashore in and around the island. That's definitely a change I've seen over the last 10 to 15 years. It's been increasing and increasing and increasing. So I don't know if that's something that's been attributed to climate change or if it's just, current change, which also could be attributed to climate change. I never remember seeing it as a kid I've been here my whole life. I never remember seeing anything like that as a kid. That's only, I would say in the last 10 to 15 years that it's gotten significantly more.

Speaker 1: Yeah, and in your opinion, would you say that the fishers in St Croix are concerned about climate change? Speaker 2: I don't know. It would be very hard for me to say.

Speaker 1: Okay, and would you say that fishery managers, researchers, and decision makers, would you say they are concerned about climate change in your opinion?

Speaker 2: Yes. All of the scientists that are in DPNR it seemed to be focused on that.

Speaker 1: Okay. I have a series of questions talking a little bit more about relationships in the community. Could you talk a little bit, or describe the relationship between fishers amongst themselves in St. Croix?

Speaker 2: I would say that it overall, it's a pretty friendly community. There are, of course individuals, there's a little strife here and there, but I would say all in all, everybody gets along pretty well and understands. There used to be a group of fishers that got together and formed a group so that they could have a little bit louder voice when it came to decision being made about commercial fishing. I don't know that that group has gotten back together. It was kind of disbanded. The person that was in charge of it, I don't know if they left island or just left the group, but there was a pretty strong sense of community there. I would love to see them get back together just because I think they need to have a little bit louder voice when it comes to decisions being made about fisheries.

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

Speaker 2: Let's see. When was the last time there was a town hall meeting, a bunch of them got together. I think it might have been with the one of the council meetings, can't remember. I was surprised that more of them didn't show up, but it was, the council came down and it was regarding... I should remember this. I think it was annual catch limits for, or potential annual catch limits for dolphin and wahoo, maybe. They hadn't instituted them, but they were talking about it and wanted to get my opinion of fishers, and you'll find in the Virgin islands that the fishers are going to lean on their pockets when it comes to their decision makings, way more than they are going to consider the environment because they rely on that specifically, and it's not like other communities where you have, a fishery that's big enough where people are doing really well, making hundreds of thousands dollars a year because they have multiple boats and they have a fleet of boats and you're able to, they do really well fishing. That's not how it is down here. It's the individual and his helper going out on their boat to catch fish for the day to sell. So they're a little bit more of a struggling community, and so they're going to lean very heavily on how it affects our pocket versus how it affects the environment. They're not blind to the environmental issue, but primary concern for them is going to be their pocket.

Speaker 1: Right. Okay. And do the fishers get together socially? Are there any events? Or any sort of big social Speaker 2: Not to my knowledge.

Speaker 1: Okay. And how would you describe the relationship between the fisherman and the fishery managers in the USVI?

Speaker 2: It's get better? A perfect example would be catch reports. It took a long time for DPNR to make the fishers understand that under reporting is not a good thing, because it affects how the annual catch reports look, if all of a sudden your catch drops off, everybody up Washington's going to think the fishery is crashing. And so they're going to restrict the next year's catch limits. And so it took a while for that message to come across, and I think they've finally taken to it. And so the relationship is better. It's still a little strained, I would say, but it's getting better.

Speaker 1: Okay. And is that the same when it comes to the local government and the federal government? Or would you say that there is a difference there?

Speaker 2: I think, well, with the federal government I don't know how close a relationship there is between the fishers and the federal government. They just fish, there's nowhere where the rubber meets the road there. Okay. But as far as, as the local government, a lot of the senators and everybody are all locals and they will see the economic effect on the fishermen as a bigger concern immediately before the environment. They're not blind to the issue, but they will definitely, I would say side with the fishers when it comes to the economic situation.

Speaker 1: Okay. I know you've been involved with the council for many years, how would you say is the relationship between the fishermen and the council?

Speaker 2: So the fishermen that are involved, they do well with the council. Nicky Gerson, he's been involved for a very, very long time way longer than me. And he is a smart man and he understands the issues and his relationship with the council, I would say is good. And there's an other, one of the only trap fishermen on island, he has a good relationship, both of them are on the Tom Daley, both he and Nick are on the FAC board, and I believe they're both at one point in time, part of the DAP or the council. And so they have a good relationship, I think, with the people that are involved with the council, the fishermen that are involved with the council, I think have a good relationship with it. The rest of the fishermen that they kind of sprinkle the information down to, I'm not sure that they understand fully how the relationship between the fishery and the council is exactly.

Speaker 1: Okay, and can you think of any examples of the fisherman and managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: No. Yeah. There's not been an organized meeting like that to my knowledge in a long time. I'd like to see that for sure. Just because getting accurate information out has always been the biggest hurdle, I think. You know, getting information out and then making sure that that information is understood accurately. So outreach and education is challenge.

Speaker 1: Right. Yeah. And so would you say in your opinion that most fishermen in the USVI understand how fishery managers make decisions or not?

Speaker 2: I don't know about most, but I would say a fair amount.

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Okay, and do you feel in your opinion that the fishery management in the USVI is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2: Yes. I think it's reasonably, scientifically sound. I think the fisheries' management has good intention, but I think that there is a serious lack of data when it comes to this specific island, even the Virgin islands in general, but this [inaudible 00:34:01] in particular, I think there is a drastic need for more data to be gathered, to make more effective decision in the fishery. So I would like to say that they have good intention, but I don't know that they have the data necessary to really make accurate decisions.

Speaker 1: Okay, and in terms of that, in terms of fairness and decisions, would you make a distinction between the local and the federal government? So between DPNR and the council, or is that pretty much the same?

Speaker 2: DPNR is where the rubber meets the road when it comes to the fishery here. The council is a little disconnected. The decisions obviously affect us here, but there's no real connection that I see between the fishers and the council, except for the few that are on the board.

Speaker 1: Right. Okay, and so you mentioned before that most of or maybe you said not, maybe not most of the fishers, but that there is a general understanding of how fishery managers make decisions. So what are some of the mechanisms that you think that contribute to that? Is it their good communication or how would you describe?

Speaker 2: There's a good effort in communication being done by DPNR at the moment. I don't know how effective that is. I know there's always a struggle every time that we discuss it in our meetings, it's always trying to get the information to the fishers, trying to make them understand where we're coming from and why we're doing what we're doing, what we can do to help and getting information from them so that we can make better decisions. So I think communication is the key there, and I do know that it's been challenging in the past.

Speaker 1: Okay, and if they exist, how are a conflict between fishers and other fishers resolved? Speaker 2: That I do not know.

Speaker 1: Okay, and what about if again, if they exist, how are conflicts between the fishers and the fishery managers resolved?

Speaker 2: A lot of times the people that are on the board that have more direct contact with the fishers, Carlos [inaudible 00:36:39], Nicky Gerson, Eddie Schuster, who's the chair, and Tom Daley people will bring their concerns to them, and they are kind of the conduit to bring their concerns to the council, the fishery advisor council, and then decisions can be made, issues can be discussed that way. So there's a good conduit there to get problems resolved if there are any.

Speaker 1: Okay. So Interviewee, these are all my questions. If there's anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to add, please feel free to add now, or if you think of anything and you want to email me later or call me later, that would be super helpful. If there's anything that you think would be important for us to know or to take to account in this project?

Speaker 2: I would say top of the pyramid for me is trying to get this FAD program back up and running and take the pressure off the race around the island, because obviously that's our most important resource here, and if we can take the fishing pressure off the reefs, I think that's going to help dramatically. You know, for tourism and the fishery, we have a lot of divers, we have a lot of snorkelers, we have a lot of people that rely on the healthy reefs around, or their income, not just fishers, and so the tourism community relies heavily on the health of the reefs for attracting guests. So it goes hand in hand. So I would say that bringing back a well managed FAD program to this island they have FADs in St. Thomas and they're being deployed more often there and they're being maintained over there, or [inaudible 00:38:57] specifically is being left out of this program and has not had that facet available to them for a very long time. Yeah. And I know Nicole's working on it, and she's probably tired of me asking about it because every single time anybody asked, well, would you like to add and agenda item? I'm like, yes. Put on that, so it got to the point now where they wouldn't even answer me. But yeah, it's got to happen. It's got to happen, got to.