Key Informant Interview 4 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Fisher

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1. So we can start. So just to start our conversation a little bit Interviewee, could you describe a little bit about your involvement with USVI Fisheries?

Speaker 2. I've been fishing since 1993 [...]. Any concerns that the fisherman have they come to me and I speak to either the senators or we speak to the commissioner or director of Fish and Wildlife, and we move along through that communication.

Speaker 1. Interviewee, in your opinion would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2. Yes. Well, the people that live in the Virgin islands are from different cultures, different islands. And mostly the background where they come from were people that mostly depend mostly on seafood. They don't have the agricultural facilities the other countries. They are a community of little islands, people from all over coming together. And they have different kind of people that have specific fish that they want every day. So you would see probably the same person, two or three times a week coming to buy a different fish. For instance, we eat red meat. We eat chicken. We eat stuff like that. They like specific fish for a specific day. And that's why a coastal island depend mostly on fishing because that's I think I cannot say the easiest thing to catch but it's a healthy food. So people would rather eat healthy food that is out of the sea strait than a processed cow or processed chicken that go to some of chemical changes before it goes to the market.

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

Speaker 2. This thing about fishing, you have to be born to do it. When I was being raised, my babysitter was a fisherman, the husband for my babysitter he was a fisherman. So every day I used to sit and come in with oodles of fish and I saw the procedure of coming in, preparing the fisher eyes. Going out to sell it. Eventually I get to the age where I got out with them and I fell in love with this. It's something that you have to be born to do it because it's very hard. It's hard work.

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

Speaker 2. We need the corals for the fish to survive. If you don't have the corals, we have seen the changes because of hurricanes and stuff like that. And every time a hurricane hits, everything goes crazy. You see a lot of [inaudible 00:03:26] it's on there for a couple months, and then it slows down very rapidly. No, no, no, be quiet. Be quiet. You're not talking. They interview me. So it's something that you have to try to evolve around it because years ago, I think we abused our resource [inaudible 00:03:48]. We were taking out more than we needed. And now years after we've seen the damage we did. We don't see the abundance of puffer fish. We don't see the abundance of lobster come like before and we have to do a lot with it. Seasonal changes has to do a lot with it. Hurricanes have to do a lot with it, but we as major world players, we have to be a little more responsible from now on. Because if we continue doing what we did in the past, I don't think we'll have a future in fishing. [Crosstalk 00:04:24] the government has stepped in and set regulations to protect the resource. System of closures, area closures for spawning. They call that closed areas. We as a resource stakeholder, we had a big play in it, in the expansion of the East End Marine Park. The creation of the snapper closed area, the high end closed area. Also the east, I don't know if I mentioned the East End Marine Park. That was a big, big thing when that happened. The fishermen were involved from the beginning and think it has been working because of that because they came. Nature conservancy team brought it to the government. They brought the fishermen in. They asked questions. We were involved in the process of lawmaking, nautic zones, fishing zones, safe zone. All of the fishermen were involved so fishermen know where they can and where they cannot fish.

Speaker 3: Right, right. So Interviewee, what would you say are the major problems that are facing fisheries in the USVI?

Speaker 2. I would say now overprotected, even though we need it. But I've seen how this protection and these seasonal closures have been helping to help the resource get a little ahead. This year after the conch season was open, we have been seeing a lot of new recruits. I would say thousands of baby conchs all over. When I say baby, I believe two inches and a half by every six to eight inches, there is a baby in the conch area. So that means that they got to reproduce and they got to spawn and the new recruits are there. So that is something positive that I see with the seasonal closures. But the thing is that there's an agenda with the Caribbean Fishery Management Council that every two, three years they come up with more regulations and they have already taken away so much from us. And we have given them so much and they're still coming up with new regulations. I heard yesterday that one of my friends, Julian Magras is in a meeting with them this week.

Speaker 2. And they want to reduce another 30% again. I don't think we can afford to lose another 30% of our fishing abilities.

Speaker 3: Right, right. Okay. Are there any other problems that you think are facing the fisheries in the USVI?

Speaker 2. Poaching is a big problem for people that are here right now. They go there and they want that quick dollar. So that's I think I have fish pots in the water and I have to leave them soaking for X amount of days to get lobster or whatever I need. I have to leave that fish pot soaking more time. So they know that if I put on Mondays, they will go Saturday and Sunday and poach my pots and get as much lobster as they can out of them. So when I go Monday, I made a whole bunch of my fish pots empty after I left them a whole week soaking for lobster. So that's I'm making sure here in the Virgin Islands.

Speaker 3: Okay. Yeah, absolutely. And which of those issues do you think if you had to rank them would be higher in importance?

Speaker 2. We need regulations but the poaching is a big issue because I have never caught them doing it. I don't know how I will respond. I don't know if I would go crazy and do something stupid. I don't know if I would just talk to them. That's a big issue because in the past people have got killed there for poaching other people. They had a group that used to come the fishermen, they come and take away the clutch. Take away whatever they had on the boat and still abuse the people then and the people got tired. Eventually they came and killed those guys. So there's a big issue in the past. They come down and they start doing it again. There are people that don't mostly drug users, some are not. Some are just greedy and it's a big issue when they reach to that point. That any crazy thing can happen up there. That people going to get killed or people going to get hurt because you can survive robbing a house. How will you respond? You will make noise or you will shoot them. That's the issue where I'm trying to get to is that's a big issue.

Speaker 3: So would you say that there have been any environmental changes or social changes that have occurred in the past few decades that come to mind?

Speaker 2. Well, hurricanes do a big paper here. Every time a hurricane pass, everything changes and reefs get destroyed, lobster holes, the bottom. We used to have [foreign language 00:10:08] in [inaudible 00:10:09] in the East End of St. Croix. And after the two last major hurricanes all that sea grass was gone. So the shore still has [foreign language 00:10:22] that sea grass, but out to the east of the island all of it is gone because of hurricanes. When that happens, everything that's loose moves. And when everything that's loose moves it destroys other structures that are stationed, stationary. An issue that we have right now not because of weather is because of traffic, boat traffic, like those big cargo vessels. They seem to be caught in corners every time they're delegated to go to point A to point B and they have been destroying a lot of our gear. Even driving too close to fishermen, to the point where fishermen have to get in their boat and get out of the way, even though we have tide flags in our boats. And we have been trying to communicate with our government to try to come into where we can establish a safety zone that where fishermen can set their gear and dive not fearing that a big vessel can overrun them or pass over and kill one of the divers. Don't play with that, no. Stop this.

Speaker 3: Yeah. Okay, great. And I know that you had mentioned already a couple of environmental changes and I just wanted to make sure there were no other changes that you wanted to talk about in the past couple of decades.

Speaker 2. Not that I remember.

Speaker 3: Okay. Have you observed any changes in the USVI Fisheries and or the environment that you think can be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2. I think that global warming has been a big paper here. We did have a lot of beaches. We lost a lot of Elkhorn corals due to hurricanes. The Staghorn corals are coming back. They are beautiful. They grow so fast that you will dive in a place this month and three months or four months after you come and there's a big community of Staghorn coral. But the Elkhorn corals, those are taking forever to come back and they're still on a wideness. So those two corals are messed up by hurricanes and just one of them is coming back fast. The other one is a little dragging back.

Speaker 3: Okay, okay. And in your opinion, are USVI fishers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2. We have to. We depend on the sea and we have been seeing the drastic changes. So we have been doing a lot through the Fisheries Advisory Committee and the District Advisory Panels. We have been back and forward in communication with these guys and letting them know what's going on. And another big player in keeping the corals healthy is the white sea urchin, [foreign language 00:13:42]. We lost a big chunk of them. We haven't been seeing them in numbers like before. When we used to see the white sea urchins, we used to see thousands of them passing over reef bottom. And after they passed there, they will leave a desert. They will eat all the algaes, all this stuff that go on the corals. They would clean them clean. And after these major hurricanes, we've seen those numbers decline drastically. So we let the lawmakers know about these changes. And a thing that we have to learn to do is we have to educate the new generations, people that are in school. Let them know how important these creatures are. Because I've seen kids in the shoreline with a stick killing the sea urchins [crosstalk 00:14:36]. The importance, what play, what is important play of those creatures in the sea. They clean the reef. For many, many years, the scientists believed that the puffer fish was the species that clean the reefs and it's not this puffer fish. It's the sea urchins and the sturgeon fish. The puffer fish eat the reef.

Speaker 3: Right, right. Okay, great. Okay, my next question is in your opinion are USVI fishery managers, researchers and decision makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2. They touch all the bases. They touch the bases of climate change. They also have concerns on the soil. You know when it rains that all that stuff goes in the water. They have been looking into that too. Every time a person is doing construction close to the shoreline, they will make sure that they have fenders to protect that soil sediment from washing into the ocean. So all of that stuff have been discussed in early days.

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

Speaker 2. Every island has a specific group and certain groups don't get along with other groups. So as any fishing community, certain areas tend to stay to stick together more and evolve in communication and helping each other than others. For instance, the west end of the island, those guys have their own click I will say. That they have their own people that they communicate with. Then we have the central island, the east end those are together, but the west end is a very different story. Do you want cookies? There's no cookies in there.

Speaker 1. Can you think of any examples of fishers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2. Well, we have had some our meetings where a couple years, a couple times when a senator wants to bring an issue that they want to see what a fisherman think about it, but most of these senators do that. For fishermen to get together to say we have to resolve this issue, they will take a miracle. Fisherman, they always have the agenda unless it's something drastic like a license or stuff like that they will not get together. I think the time and the agenda that they have for the week, they are very strict into that. For fishermen to get together that's something out of this world. That would be like once in our life then that that would happen if fishermen have issues and they get together to resolve them.

Speaker 1. Okay. And what about socially, do fishers in your community get together socially?

Speaker 2. Well, when we are selling fish. When somebody's birthday, stuff like that. But we don't really do parties in Saint Thomas. It's a whole different story. Those guys in Saint Thomas, they have ball games, fisherman groups against other fisherman groups. They have food sales or food parties where every fisherman brings something. And over there is more good night, get done over here when it comes to those [crosstalk 00:18:38]. They even play ball against I think the government.

Speaker 1. And do you have an opinion as to why in St. Croix the fishers are not as tight knit?

Speaker 2. I don't have an idea why not. Our group in the center of where we guys met, we have been telling them we need to do a cookout. We need to do something to bring the clients back. Because we have issues with the scalers, the people that clean the fish. They're not facing as wise [inaudible 00:19:25]. They just go there to make a little dollar to smoke their pot and they don't care if they're with a [inaudible 00:19:31], a little old lady or anybody. They just open them out and they ask against these people and we have lost a lot of customers [inaudible 00:19:38]. Some of them do something, let's do a little party. Let's put it in a billboard. Let's put it on a radio. Let's say we have free fish and Johnny cake this day. And everybody tell me yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah but nothing is done.

Speaker 1. I see. And how would you describe the relationship between fishers and fishery managers in the USVI?

Speaker 2. We have a handful. Don't take me wrong. They have the greatest ideas. When you talk to them, they have the greatest idea. But if they go to a meeting, they go drunk and then they make a fool of themselves. So that's an issue, but communication wise they come either to me or to Mr. Schuster. They talk to us and they bring the issues. We write them down and we do the agenda for our meetings. We bring these issues up. But they won't go to a meeting and sit out there because they can have an opinion. They can have a say, but they don't want to spend two, three hours sitting down in a place where people are talking a language that they don't understand, but they don't deal with.

Speaker 1. And is there a difference would you say when it comes to the relationship between the fisheries and the local government, versus the relationship with the federal government?

Speaker 2. A lot of years we have to sit down with our governor and he has listened to our issues. Federal wise is a whole different ballpark. We have to do everything in writing. They will not meet with us and just say unless they're going to bring something a lot that they need an input in, they will do a town hall meeting and they will listen to our concerns. But no, there is mostly written letters and it's more technical. Where our local government, there's always somebody writing down our issues and they come up to us and tell us, listen, this is being done and it's going to take this timeframe to be done. That part I like about our local government. I've been working with a fisherman person in the past years.

Speaker 1. And can you think of any examples of fishers and fishery managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2. No. I think nothing's been done through the FAC and the Fishery Advisory Committee that has been working.

Speaker 3: Mm-hmm (affirmative), okay. So Interviewee, do you feel that fishery management in the USVI is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2. Yes, we always have a decision. Always what I like about our committee is that every time an issue comes up they will listen to the fisherman claims and they explain. Then if they know that we are overregulated and if they're trying to pass a law to [crosstalk 00:22:59] part of it. And I tell them

no, we have given them enough. I don't agree with that. They will go with me. They are never go against the fisherman. They always listen to both sides of the story [inaudible 00:23:12]. So I think that has been working great for fishermen, even though we have been very strict when it comes to regulations. As I said, we are overregulated and we have done that not to lose the ability to fish. We even extended the system of closures for Queen Conch from three months to five months. And then the lobster numbers has been safe for many, many years according to the commercial catch reports. So we don't have to go to that to regulate lobster. But conch since it was overfished for many, many years, [inaudible 00:23:55].

Speaker 3: Okay, so that was going to be my question. You had said that yes that you do consider the relationship to be fair in the decisions that are made. Is that also true for the federal government?

Speaker 2. I haven't been in a lot of those meetings. That question would better be answered by our chair is Eddie Schuster because lately I've been attending only local meetings.

Speaker 3: Okay, okay. So do you think most fishers in the USVI understand how fishery managers make those decisions?

Speaker 2. Yes, we have been involved in the process for over 18 years and they have come and explain. They have come and they have taken the time and [inaudible 00:25:01] down. And they have been explained once when my daughter was a baby. She was just listening to a meeting and felt it was unfair. So she said, "How is my daddy supposed to support us and pay our bills if you shut them down here and shut them down there?" And I was surprised to hear I think she was eight or nine then. And I

was like, wow. And we have along the chair for the fisheries, [inaudible 00:25:28] was impressed by how she was expressing herself, because that's how I felt. And I didn't know she had felt that way too. Because when you depend on an income on fishing and so much doors has been closed, they see how daddy is affected by these decisions. So these decision makers have been slowing down and working. I know there is a mandate that they have to follow to protect our resource. And I understand that they were sued by NGO to get this mandate implemented, but they need to understand that we live out of fishing too. And after old fisherman I've been fishing from 1992, I will say that I've learned to fish smart. I fish what I need to sell that day. Instead of like before when I need to go and cast a net and catch four or five, six [inaudible 00:26:28] and I have to sell it under price because I couldn't get all my fish sold to go fishing the next day. So now I catch what I need. And when I reach the shore, everything is sold already. And a lot of fisherman have been doing that type of fishing. A lot of fishermen left after the hurricanes. So even though the folks say we have 119 fishermen in the Virgin Islands, I would say now 30 are fishing commercially full time. About 30 are fishing full time. Because we used to determine our regulation by the amount of numbers of license, but not everybody fishes. A lot of people work full-time jobs and they have a commercial license. So when they're laid off or when they don't work, they can rely on fishing. And for many years that was misinterpret and a lot of regulations was done because of that.

Speaker 3: Right, okay. So Interviewee, if they exist how are conflicts between fishers and other fishers resolved?

Speaker 2. A fisherman conflict is resolved when you save their life. When they have an issue out there and they need somebody to rescue them and you are passing by and they're looking for help, and you help them, well, you're friends forever. Other than that shit, you know I said that. Other than that there are issues that last for years. There are people that don't have today his friend because he went and sell to his customer and he didn't like that. So we are not a friend of them, little kid stuff.

Speaker 3: Right, okay. How about conflicts between fishers and fishery managers? How are they resolved?

Speaker 2. I don't think we have those here. We are not that [inaudible 00:28:46]. I'm cleaning my office.

Speaker 1. Interviewee, these are all our questions. I just wanted to thank you one more time for taking the time to talk to us. This was very helpful. And a lot of really good information. I just wanted to ask you if there's anything that you would like to add, anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important that you would want to add?

Speaker 2. Well, I would you guys this is from other people that we help us establish a safe fishing zone because we have an issue with those big vessels and they've been costing us money. And I fear that a fisherman they'll be another one killed before the government decides we're going to do something to stop this from happening. That is my major issue right now. We need official support for the people of the Virgin Islands, especially here in St. Croix.

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