Key Informant Interview 9 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Government

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1: I will start with the first question which is just to ask you to describe a little bit about your involvement with US Virgin Islands fisheries?

Speaker 2: [...]

Speaker 1: Interviewee, in your opinion, would you say that US Virgin Islands coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2: Yes. Yes. The seafood is the number one staple, a protein, in a diet of Virgin Islanders. And it's not just about diet, it's just part of our culture. The Virgin Islands, I mean, the West Indies on a whole, but I'll speak solely on the Virgin Islands because that's my home. You grew up where the ocean, it's part of your entertainment. It's part of your social sphere. It's an industry, it's part of our culture. So the ocean provides a multitude of, what's the word I want to use? It's in our life for a multitude of reasons; pleasure, industry, just wellbeing. Because as kids, the one thing that Virgin Islands, kids love is going to the beach, that's the big thing. Like kids in the States, they like to go to Disneyland. Well, we like to go to the beach.

Speaker 1: In your opinion, US Virgin Islands fishermen are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 2: Oh yeah. I mean, there's some fishermen that their entire existence, their entire financial existence, their entire financial wellbeing is based on the ocean. And if you go a step further, and you take a look at what made them become fishermen in the first place, some of it is generational. And some of it is the option to provide for the family because you were a male member of the family, and there may have been some situation where the father couldn't provide anymore. It forced some fishermen to drop out of school, and go to that one trade, and the only trade that they know, which is fishing. Some of it is by choice. This is what I want to do. And without the ocean, then there's nothing else for them. They have nothing else to go back to. You know like in Belize, I think, they gave a lot of the fishermen there, the opportunity to starting the ecotourism industry. They encourage them to have whale watching businesses, and all that sort of stuff. Well, we don't have that here. We don't have it here. That's just not that option. The tourism here doesn't allow for them to venture in that direction. So fishing is all they've got.

Speaker 1: Okay. Right. Would you say that US Virgin Islands coastal communities are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2: Yes. Let me think about how I want to answer this. Okay. Because they're dependent on the fishing communities, right? Well, we all know you can't have thriving fishing community without a thriving coral community. Just by mere default, yes. Are there a lot of businesses or a lot of people that go out solely just to enjoy the beauty of coral? Yes. But it's not a make or break thing. In other words, if a fisherman doesn't have the opportunity to go fishing, right? He can't provide for his family. He doesn't have an education, what led him to become a fisherman, he just doesn't have an opportunity to do anything else. Versus people that depend on the actual beauty of coral. Because I'm picking this apart, real, real detail for you. It's not as dire as a fishermen having fishing, the ability to fish, in order to make a living. But like I said, you don't have a thriving fishing community or fishing... Let me think about how I want to say this. I want to get this right. If you don't have a thriving coral community, you will not have a thriving fish community. So yes, they are codependent on each other. You can't have one without the other.

Speaker 1: Okay. Interviewee, I just had a few questions to ask you. What would you say are the major problems that are facing fisheries in the US Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: An assortment. Number one, runoff. Runoff is the number one problem. It's like I said, your coral communities don't thrive, your fishing communities will limp along, or will suffer, in it's in its entirety. So the government of the Virgin Islands has to do something to curtail the amount of runoff that takes place during heavy rainfall events. It is very evident when you go up and you take a look at the coastline, you could see the tremendous amount of runoff that's taking place. I personally don't believe that a fisherman is the number one reason why coral communities don't thrive in the Virgin Islands. I really don't believe that. There's enough evidence that states that fish traps don't do as much damage as they did, or as people thought. But when you take a look at the [inaudible 00:11:57] coral communities, for the coral ecosystem, it's pretty much dead, and it's dead from runoff. It's dead from various types of coral disease, the bleaching. Now you've got [inaudible 00:12:12] coral tissue loss disease. So a combination of coral disease and runoff, and I can honestly sit here and tell you... Or I believe, I do believe that you'll see more coral disease, if they don't curtail the amount of runoff that's taking place. Because of the amount of chemicals, and the amount of just non-friendly, eco friendly type chemicals and stuff that's being done on land that is running off into the ocean, it's killing the coral community. So I think that's a problem. I think the government needs to really take a look at trying to do something about the runoff. I believe that... Hold on one second. Uh-huh (affirmative). Uh-huh (affirmative). Hold on. Hold on. Okay. Sorry. Yeah. The government is a problem. I think that it's not enough enforcement for fishers themselves, and as well as there's like a lot of illegal fishing. I think the fishermen themselves, they pretty much have come to the point where they know there's no enforcement. They're just doing things that they know they shouldn't be doing. I think there's a lot of misinformation that's being put out there, which results in fishermen doing stuff that they shouldn't do. Let me give you an example to be more specific. When there was word that there might be a [inaudible 00:14:53] lobster trap reduction, right? People, all these fishermen went out and bought all these lobster traps and started dumping them in the ocean. And yeah. So there's a tremendous amount of pressure being put on a very healthy lobster population, and there's no enforcement. So they're just doing whatever they want. I don't think enough time is spent educating the fishermen themselves. And we have gotten to a point where the only time they really hear from anyone is if we want something from them, right? Or we're going to tell them, "This is how it's going to go." I don't think there's enough fishermen participation in making decisions. And I think that would lead to them being a lot more respectful to the fishing community. I don't know. I've been trying to preach that for years and I think now even more so, there's just a severe disconnect between the present administration, and the fishermen. And eventually, that will lead to no good. That's not going to work well, in anyone's favor. And that's really unfortunate.

Speaker 1: Right. Interviewee, if you had to rank these issues that you listed, what would be your top three of those issues that you listed?

Speaker 2: Run off. Is one. Fishermen participation is two, because there's so many fingers that can come from that. Once you educate them, you can correct several of those things I mentioned. And the third one is I would say probably illegal fishing. Yeah. The government's failing, and they're failing in several ways. So government failure is one, the lack of fishermen participation is two, and then just illegal fishing is third. There are a lot of fishermen from Puerto Rico. Every once in a while you hear a fisherman say, "Oh, yeah, I passed the Japanese trawler out there." Yeah.

Speaker 1: Okay. Thank you. Okay. So what would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the US Virgin Island fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Well, let's start with the good first. The good is fishermen involvement has increased significantly. There are a lot of fishermen out there that no longer go, "Well, God put it there, it'll always be there." I think they've come to their senses and realize, "No, we need to do our part to make sure that we preserve it for generations to come." So that is a good change. Because it was very ignorant years, and years ago. I mean, they didn't want any part of the government. Unfortunately, we went from bad to good, and now we've gone back to bad. But the going back to that is not... Well, we think, God put it there, it'll always be there. Now there's this severe mistrust for the government, and the government's failure to try and mend those fences, the gap is just getting greater and greater. So that's going to be whoever decides they want to take up that football and run, that's a big ball they're going to have to carry on their back in order to try and put that in a goalpost, to repair it. So that's for me, the good and the bad. I personally, my biggest thing and honestly, very like gut wrenching tInterviewee, I don't see... [inaudible 00:19:58]. The responsibility of protecting the ocean, or the fishing community and fishing communities here, has just pretty much fallen to the wayside. It's just falling apart. And that's really hard for me to witness. Because for me, that was a big thing when I was a director; building that trust. Doing my best to like pound that education in their head. And then, when I retired, the person that came behind of me just has no desire to do so. In fact, she's as vocal in saying that they're illiterate, and has no quorums in saying so. It just has completely fallen apart and that's just going to lead to people doing what they want because they just have no trust, or any respect for the government. So that's a bad thing. That's really going to end bad if they don't fix it, and that's my big thing.

Speaker 1: Okay. Interviewee, what would you say are the most significant environmental changes that have occurred in the US Virgin Islands in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Too much development. Way too much of development. The intra coral communities are suffering because of it. That's like the biggest thing. That's the most in my face thing that I've seen. Its just way too much development. Climate change, that's everywhere. I mean, when you ask somebody a list of environmental changes, climate change is number

one on the list. I mean you print out a sheet from one to 10, and climate change is already in number one. So climate change, definitely, is like the number one thing. And then when you add runoff to it, that's just an equation that just leads to total disaster. The devastation that's being done to the mangrove ecosystems here, your nursery habitat is lost. The Sargassum seaweed was just another horrific event that no one could control, and that's being decimated. The entire ecosystem on the Virgin Islands, decimated. I watched mangrove smother and die, right in the backyard of Fish and Wildlife. Nursery habitat gone. Just the amount of turtle hatchlings and fish, like juvenile fish that washed away, was just, it was horrible to see. That was horrific. And unfortunately, no one can predict what it's going to be this year. In the months to come, I guess it'll start, and we'll see, but it was really bad. It's really bad for the last... I moved back home in '14? Since 2014. 2015 probably was the worst. And then 2019 was bad as well. You know there are things that you can't help, they're Mother Nature driven things. And then there're things that we as human beings we can try our best to curtail or to stop. But we're failing as human beings on a whole and then Mother Nature herself is just relentless. Just utterly relentless and not giving you any good, like major events, nothing that you could go, "Woo!" Will put a smile on your face. It's just one horrific thing after the next.

Speaker 1: Just a real time. I think my next question, Interviewee, you may have already addressed some of these points, but have you observed any changes in the US Virgin Islands fisheries and/or environments that you think can be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: Yeah, I think because you know, like a Sargassum event, because there are so there months and months and months of just constant, constant, constant activity. And we as humans, Virgin Islanders are just typically behind the curve I think. It's something that we know typically will happen year after year at certain times of the year. And I think what happens is the government here we'll go, "Oh, we'll get through this." You know, that quote that just drives you crazy. "Oh, you know, it has to get bad before it gets better, but we'll make it through." Well, yeah, we'll make it through, but make it through equates to what? The damaging of something in nature that takes centuries or years, hundreds of years or past someone's lifetime to repair? That is just foolhardy. That is ignorance at its peak. And this government here needs to realize that this is going to happen. We need to be prepared. No one knew that the coronavirus would be... Oh, that's my dog, [inaudible 00:26:32] would be a pandemic. So that's just out of the box, an example. But the Sargassum seaweed event it's been happening every year and all the scientists say that they don't know when it's going to stop. But it creates such havoc at our ecosystem of which we depend on. Right? Because we're tourism driven, you would think that they would have a plan for when it happens. But no, it's the same mass confusion every year. The runoff. It's just to me that government's failure to plan, the government's failure to prevent just destruction on our environment, whether it be terrestrial or marine. To me, it's just mind boggling to me. Climate change is everywhere, so therefore the Virgin Islands itself, because our entire economy is built on the beauty of it, and climate change is such a kick in the ass to anyone's environment, then you would think, Okay, well, we got to do something to make people a little bit more responsible to preserve what we have. And it's just the stick your head in the sand mentality that drives me crazy. This is 106,000 people. You're telling me the State of California that has millions of people, millions, they're doing stuff. They're putting measures in place to make people be responsible. You're telling me that the lawmakers here and the government here can't make 106,000 people, that's nothing, be responsible for their carbon footprint or the way they treat the environment? That is crazy to me. To me, that's just the government's failure in epic proportions. And you can see it. You can see it. I'm sitting on my porch, my porch overlooks Charlotte Amalie Harbor. And you could see it. It's like way too much development. You know, there's all these boats that are anchored in the harbor. There's throwing their sewage just like, overboard. There's no pump-out station. There's no way for them to go and pump their bathrooms out. So where do you think it's happening? Right overboard. You're sitting in Government House, looking out in the harbor and you know have no pump-out station? There's money available. The government itself needs to stop and they need to have this, everybody just put the brakes on. And you know something? Okay. What is it that we need to make us better stewards of our environment? Wow. Look at that. All these boats, where they dumping their sewage? Oh-oh... just things that can be done. You can't solve it all but if everybody does a little piece it just makes the world a whole lot better. And we might just be here a little bit longer. It drives me nuts. It drives me nuts. I mean, I've gotten to the point now where I have decided that come June 1st, 2021, I no longer want to live here because by then this place will have gone to shit, excuse my language. It's bad. I mean, it's just bad for me because as an environmentalist, I just don't understand how our priorities are just so off base. I don't get it. And I think if people here realized that the powers that be, the politicians, if they do something different and stop electing from the same pool of people, then they'd realize they might just get a group of people, the lawmakers that are like pro-environmentalists, and then we could make a difference. But that's how the voting populace of the Virgin Islands work. But for me, it's just government failure. And you can see it everywhere. And you see it everywhere. You jump in the ocean and it's right there in front of you, you don't even have to swim too far to see it. You know?

Speaker 1: So Interviewee, I just have a question. You said climate change is everywhere. What are some of the things that you're seeing that you would say, this is an indication of climate change happening here?

Speaker 2: Coral. So, coral. The coral. Just the destruction that's taking place. There's a place right off Hans Lollik, it's like this wall, it's like maybe, I'd say maybe 60, 70 feet. And I remember diving that. And I would literally stand at the bottom and look up, and it's just like this wall. It was just thriving, the most beautiful coral I'd ever seen in my life. Just like a wall. It just goes straight to like the top of the water, and actually it breaks the surface. And I remember going back there 10 years ago and it was all dead. I felt like I was in a graveyard. I remember sobbing in my mask. Sobbing, going, "Oh my God, what could do something like this?" And that's just everywhere. I don't think the government has stopped and realized that stony coral tissue loss disease, they don't start to do something to help Marilyn Brandt and her crew at the university try and do something, we're done here. Between coral, the bleaching, that tissue loss disease. We got all kinds of problems. With water temperatures are above average, the coral are dying. It's just really hard to watch the invasion of the invasive sea grass, the Halophila, that's another nightmare. And then eventually they're taking over thriving sea turtle feeding habitat. So then you're going to start seeing a loss in your sea turtles. So I don't think the government, they say, "Yeah, yeah, we hear you. We hear you." But they're not doing anything to try and change it or contribute to the prevention of, and that's really hard. That's really hard. But you see it. I mean, the ocean is just one big Petri dish for climate change.

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

Speaker 2: Yes. Yes, some of them are pretty knowledgeable, especially the younger ones. I would say the average is maybe like 45 and younger. They're very much aware of it. I think some of the older guys are seeing changes, but don't really understand that those are changes as a result of climate change. So they wouldn't call it as such, but they are seeing changes. I think they all do. If you put them all in one spot and you ask them, "So tell me the changes you've seen." They're going to tell you, this is what I've seen, and you know that's a result of the climate change, even though they may not know it. A lot of the fishermen here, the average age is like 60. And a lot of them don't really use a computer, they don't really pay attention to the whole climate change issue. But the younger ones do. And they'll tell you, Oh yeah, that's climate change for sure. And then again, it goes back to the education. The government here themselves, aren't doing anything to teach them and educate them that the things that they're seeing is climate change and it's in their face.

Speaker 1: And, and you think that the younger fishermen are getting that information on their own, just being exposed to it on the internet or things like that, or?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah. A lot of them they'll go and look up like, you know the movie that was done, Chasing Coral? That was a big thing. A lot of them younger guys looked at it and had their, the next generation take a look at it, and their kids. But an older fishermen may not necessarily have watched it. "I don't watch movies," that kind of ignorant mentality, but could tell you, "Yeah, yeah. I've seen that." They really need to do something about educating fishermen here. It's just this major gap. And I wish someone would come in and just say, listen I'm going to dedicate an entire year to two years in just educating these fishermen as much as I can on all the things that are directly relate to them. And you'd see a big difference. I think you'd get a more responsible group of people instead of like a small handful of them. You'd just see a complete difference. To me that's a big thing. That's a big thing, this education. I mean, when I retired, I started my own company and it's called YB Green. It's an LLC. And was well on my way to sort of the fishermen's association. We are going to write for some education money to do exactly that. And then the coronavirus hit. Because we were waiting for our 501(c) status to come through before we could complete the submission of the grant and then the coronavirus hit and it just totally derailed it. But you know, I'll continue to pay for the license because that's like a big thing for me. That's like where my heart is at. Because fishing will continue here. There's no ifs, ands or buts. It may not be 150 men strong in St. Thomas and another 150 in St. Croix, but there will be fishermen that will continue to fish. Because the culture of the Virgin Islands, it may change, but it's not going to go away completely. And fishing is such an integral part of that. It's like I told you, the ocean satisfies our soul in so many different ways that it's going to continue. So that's my task, is to educate the ones that are going to continue to just be more responsible and be more involved in the decisions that have to do with them. I think the younger people, because they're more computer literate, that it won't be such a hard task for me. If I have to try and educate a 70 year old fishermen, I probably would shoot myself in the head because I probably won't get anywhere. But a younger person, I think it will be that much easier. And I say, I we'll have a whole, like a much grander result.

Speaker 1: So Interviewee, in your opinion, do you think the US Virgin Island fishery managers and researchers and decision makers are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: Well, the director of Fish and Wildlife is the biggest, it's like the glue that holds it all together. It's not the Commissioner, it's the Director of Fish and Wildlife. The Commissioner of Planning and Natural Resources has so many different things that he or she's responsible for. So it boils down to the director. The director has to be the one that makes sure all these moving parts keep moving. And the young lady that's there right now, number one, doesn't know what she's doing. And number two has no desire to do so. And I think a part of that is, probably bit off more than she can chew. It really takes a lot to be the director because it's just so many moving parts that you have to keep in line, that a person has that has never worked for the federal government or worked for an agency or be responsible for an agency that had so many different grants, so many different responsibilities it's too much for her. And it has literally like gone through this metamorphosis where it's now become adversarial. She lives in st. Croix and may have a softer spot for the Crucian fishermen. She absolutely has no desire to work with the St. Thomian fishermen. And it is very adversarial. And it doesn't get any better when about a month, month and a half ago, in speaking to the Economic Development Agency, she told someone there that she considers fishermen of the Virgin islands all illiterate. And that ended up going to Government House and it ended up falling in a senator's lap, and it then got out into the fishing community. So needless to say, the St. Thomian fishermen really don't want anything to do with her. So the government, or Nicole, the new Director of Fish and Wildlife, Nicole, has failed miserably and is not a type of person that wants to listen to anyone's constructive advice, she sees it as criticism. So therefore the spiral just keeps getting bigger and bigger, and the problem just keeps getting larger and larger. And I think they're past repair when it comes to the St. Thomas fishermen. The fact that the government has not given them their disaster aid, and we're now beginning a hurricane season again in June has not helped the situation. Nicole failed miserably at that. It's just more things being added to this equation that just ends up with a horrible end result. So I don't know, did I answer your question that kind of go off on these tangents? You know [inaudible 00:42:13]. Somebody to unleash on all this stuff I have pent up. So did I answer your question?

Speaker 1: So my question was geared at, do you think that managers and researchers and decision makers are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: Yes. I know the commissioner of planning, Commissioner Oriol, because he has spent just as long as I have been at Fish and Wildlife, he's maybe 10 years shy, younger than me there. He spent his entire career in Coastal Zone Management, which you know, has to do with coral. So I know he's pretty big with climate change. Now, whether he does anything, if he has any action when it comes to climate change, other than recognizing that it is a problem, and we're seeing the results of it here, I can't honestly say yes. The previous administration had a climate change guru here, a guy named Shawn Malone. Now that office, I don't hear anything about it anymore. I don't know if it's been dissolved. I know Shawn no longer lives here, but I don't think he was ever replaced. So the previous administration did recognize, but this particular administration, I think their priorities are just elsewhere. So they haven't continued to carry that flame, the climate change flame, from the previous administration. But JP does know. I mean, he's been neck deep in it for 15 plus years. And he's actually been with CZM for a little over 20? So he knows. He's seen it. He's seen the change that has taken place over a multitude of years. So yeah, I'll give him that. But whether he does anything, I can't say. And as far as the politicians are concerned I think the most significant thing they've ever done is they banned the use of certain sunscreens. And that was a big thing. And then the plastic bag ban, that was another big thing. But as far as having someone that continually keeps their foot on the gas, when it comes to climate change, and we don't have that here. We don't have it here.

Speaker 1: So Interviewee, I have a couple of questions that have to do with relationships between different stakeholders. So how do you describe the relationship between fishers and fishers? So between them, amongst themselves, how are these relationships in the US Virgin Islands?

Speaker 2: Prior to the hurricanes Irma and Maria, it was pretty much... They're like small groups. There're pockets of fishermen they kind of helped each other out when it comes to fishing, like if their boat broke, they would help each other out. There were like pockets. But after the hurricane, they really came together as a unified group. Everyone had suffered some sort of damage, whether it be significant or minimal, but everybody helped each other out. And then as they recovered from the hurricane, it kind of spread apart. And then as they recovered from the hurricane, it kind of spread apart. I don't think it's as divisive as it was prior to the hurricane, but now what's happening is because there's all this misinformation about upcoming rules and regulations. I think what now is happening is you're seeing as we have this saying here, "Every man for themselves, God, for us all". So now you're seeing fishermen just kind like look out for themselves. They still help each other out, but it's not as unified as it was previously, seeing fishermen undercut each other, just trying to get their product sold, because of the hurricanes, there's not the tourist industry like it was before. So it's not as financially prosperous as it was. So there's kind of a lot of underhanding moves being done amongst each other. But if they have to come together, they would. Bygones would be bygones and they would do what they have to do for each other, when it's all said and done.

Speaker 1: Are there any other examples that you can think of, of the fishers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Yeah. When there was the talk of the fish trap reduction plan, they got together, they were asked by the government or by Fish and Wildlife to come together to try and have a hand in a fish drop reduction plan. And maybe it was sold to them, "You know, if you don't help us, then you're going to end up with something you really can't live with". But regardless, they did come together, they showed up for meetings. They were pretty unified. Even now, when Julian and I say we're going to hold a meeting, and they know it's Julian and myself, they know we're coming with something they need to hear. So they show up and they show up in good numbers. I mean, there are 150 some fishermen here in St. Thomas. But of those 150, only maybe 50 of them are full time, commercial fishermen, where their entire livelihood is based on fishing a 100 percent. Those are the guys that show up to the meetings. Those are the ones that you want there. So they still show up. So, they're there still, they know that if there's any... Julian and I get wind of something coming from the federal government down this way, we put out a flyer, we get on social media and our phones, and we start calling up people and let people know, "Hey, you need to show up to this meeting", and they show up. They will show up for anything that pertains to their fishery. And the one thing now that will get them to show up in mass numbers, is there fishery disaster aid, that they have yet to receive. And that has been an epic, colossal failure [crosstalk 00:49:17] government part. Because Alexis and Matt... right? ...wrote that disaster a plan, and did a wonderful, did a beautiful job. I mean, if somebody wanted to see what those two individuals are capable of, that's the document that I would use. Just the surveys that they, the post hurricane assessments, and then the report that was written that was sent to NOAA and as a result, the aid that came. And then they had to write a spend plan, how they were going to spend this $10.6 million. Matt and Alexis, if there's two individuals that I miss working with, those are the two. Those are the two of them. And to see now two, three years later, they still don't have their money. And the money is sitting here in the government's treasury is just really bad. It's really, really bad. So they'll show up for that. So it kind of, it depends to answer your question. It depends on what the issue is. They'll show up for it.

Speaker 1: And, do the fishermen there also get together socially. Are there any examples of events or any festivals?

Speaker 2: The biggest event that they get together socially is a King, a King Mackerel Tournament, fishing tournament, that takes place the Bastille Day weekend, which is July, the second... I think the third weekend in July. That is the one event that you will see all the fishermen come together in one social circle. That's the one thing. And then of course, they still

get together socially, on a daily basis, just to keep up with friends, dear friends. Some of them are map, related by marriage. So they see each other all the time. So, it's like the assortment of reasons that you'll see them come together socially. But the one where you see them more than anything else is the Bastille Day tournament in North side. And then Father's Day is another big social event in Frenchtown, and you'll see them there. Yeah, just French, it's just a French thing. So regardless of where you live.

Speaker 1: Describe the relationship between the fishermen and the fishery managers in the U.S. VI. And if there is a difference, make a distinction between the local and the federal government.

Speaker 2: Okay. So with the local government, I pretty much told you about that relationship. When it comes to the feds, I think the easiest way to describe their relationship with the federal government can be done in one word: mistrust. They just don't trust them. I think even if the federal government did try to do it honestly, and put their best foot forward, there would still be a whole lot of apprehension, just because of the way they dealt with them in the past. And by that, I mean, they weren't always forthcoming or forthright with the information that they would give them. And I think that was because they wanted it, the end result to be something in particular. So they kind of jaded things, and it just created a whole lot of mistrust. So every time you talk about the federal government to them, they just, "Oh God, what are they going to do now?" That is sort of like the initial reaction. Like "What are you coming in with now, Interviewee?" I'm like, "Oh, nothing in particular. They just pretty much want your input." And, well, "What, for what, since when?" And I think what Julian really hammering home that, no decision can be made or no regulation can be implemented without fishermen involvement. And because of the Magnuson-Stevensons Act, one of the elements in there is community involvement, and they pretty much grab onto that, and they are forcing the federal government to make sure that they have a seat at the table.

Speaker 1: Yeah. And has that changed, would you say that there's more involvement now than it used to be?

Speaker 2: Oh, most definitely. Ever since 2005, when the Fishermen's Association was started, I think prior to that it was pretty much, you were trying to get the crumbs that fell off the table on the floor. And now with the Fishermen's Association, they pretty much kicked the door down and made a seat. They literally built a chair, that they drag to the table. And shit has not moved from there. It hasn't always been strong, but ever since, I would say that Tony's been on the council, six see... Might be going on his sixth, so about, maybe about 10 years now, I would say between Julian and Tony, Darryl, Brian, they go. They show up there at the meetings when they need to be, so it's changed significantly, and it's been consistent and they're there 150%, all the time. So it's good. It's really good. It's a good thing to see.

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

Speaker 2: Council meetings are always is the first thing that comes to mind. I don't think, I mean, when I was a director, I constantly held meetings four times a year for them. I don't think that's happening now just because Nicole doesn't really want to deal with them. She doesn't want to stand before them, which is a pretty bad thing, but they get together for the council meeting. I think any side meeting the council may sponsor, like the fishermen advisory committee supposed to meet once a month. And that committee has representation from various aspects of the fishing committee, diving committee and the government. They're supposed to meet once a month. So there's the fishermen advisory committee, one here, one in St. Croix. They meet every month. They haven't met in a couple months in St.Thomas because it fell apart because of Nicole. But it's my understanding that the commissioner is going to appoint a temporary group to get it started. And then he'll reactivate these monthly meetings. So that takes place. And that has local government representation, the district advisory panel, which is a subcommittee under the council. They meet all the time. And that, I mean, that is probably the best representation of the fishing sector that you could ask for. And then there are governmental officials on that as well. So there's various, it's a regular thing. What comes out of it sometimes, it's pretty productive. Sometimes it just kind of just drags its heels. It just kind of depends on what's the agenda, what's on the agenda. But they yeah, they meet all the time.

Speaker 1: Okay. So Interviewee, do you feel that fishery management in the U.S. Virgin islands is fair in the decisions that they make? And I guess the same thing, if you, if there's this distinction between local and federal, maybe you can differentiate between each of those branches.

Speaker 2: Well, I think on the local level, are they fair? Well, you'd have to do something in order to be fair. That's my answer to that. But as far as the federal government is concerned, I think because the council can't do anything as far as the easiest concern, without calling the council together. Yeah. I think there's a check and balance there for them. And I personally have witnessed them being lenient, giving us pretty much, where they've kind of dug their feet in, they kind of ease up a little bit. So I, in all fairness to them, the federal government, anyway, I think they've been pretty fair. I think they have. But the local government, I, like I said, you have to do something in order to, for me to say you're fair. They haven't done anything.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Okay. And do you think most fishers in the U.S. Virgin islands understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: Overall? No. No, I think there's some very small percentage understand how it works, but for the most part, no, they don't. They don't. I think that they just don't like people, some of them just don't like having to follow rules and regs, and some of them get totally get how it works and, some may think it's unfair the way it is. It just depends on the individual. The older men may feel that they should be, there should be no rules. It's bare ocean and they should be able to do what they, they've been doing for years. Look, it's lasted this long. "Yeah. But they didn't have climate change when you were wee tod, like a little teen, a 20 year old, you don't have to worry about climate change." So yeah. A little information, little education could help a long way.

Speaker 1: Right. Okay. And then if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and other fishers resolved?

Speaker 2: For sure, the fisher? Other than the normal brawl? I think if you resolve it, it's majority of the time it's done 99.9% of the time, it's done through a conversation, right? 1% and they had a little physical bros going on there. But for the most part it's done just through conversation, coming to a meeting of the minds, a come to Jesus moment, and they figure it out, and they either continue a relationship or friendship or they don't, but it's resolved. It's resolved.

Speaker 1: And how about conflicts, if they exist, between fishers and fishery managers, resolved?

Speaker 2: State and federal well, the state level, that normally requires, like a Senator or some sort, like a legislator, getting involved, because it just, as of lately, because of Nicole it just can't, we can't seem to find a happy medium. So what's been happening is we've been asking senators to play referee, for lack of a better term, between the government and the fishers, the state government, and the fishers. And that has seemed to work, as of lately. I think there's a whole, the fishermen never wanted the present commissioner to be the commissioner. And he has done nothing to mend the fences between he and them. Absolutely done nothing. And then you add Nicole to the equation and it's just, it's crazy. It's just utterly crazy. The federal government, they pretty much just call out powers to be. There's some back channel in. Somebody would call somebody, "Hey, listen, we got to think this way." And then when it all comes down to making a decision, it's done. It's done. I think for the most part. And this is really sad because you should be happier with the state, your state politics, because that's closer to home than the feds, but I think they're happier with the feds than they are with the state. Speaking of which, Deanna is calling me on the other line.

Speaker 1: So Interviewee, these are all our questions. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to add? Or...

Speaker 2: I guess it's, the thing for me, like I said earlier, is I just think that there has to be somebody that is constantly here, but gives, that cares, but continually has their foot on the gas here. I think if, I'm pretty sure that if you had somebody that did that... Let me give an example. Nicole hired a liaison. A liaison is that individual that goes between the fishermen and the government, whether it be federal or state. But Nicole never gave them a safe. Nicole hired an individual whose husband was a fisherman 15 years ago. And he went on to become a customs officer, and she herself, the person that she hired, has never really been involved with any fishery issues within the last 15 years. So, that alone is a problem. Because that person that you're asking now to be the intermediary, is somebody that one, they're like, "You, who as who the, where the hell, how did they pick you? You haven't come to a fisheries meeting in 10 plus years. You have not been involved in this battle and brawl with us for 15 plus years. And how are we to trust you to take our message to them?" And then on top of that, she was hired in this cloak and dagger type thing. And it was a handpicked selection from Nicole without anybody's advice. That's the kind of stuff that's taking place. And to me, the government should have never allowed that to happen. And the only way they're going to repair this is they need to get rid of Nicole. They need to get, remove Nicole as a director. The trail of disaster that she's leaving behind, right? Is something that will take, by the time this administration is over, literally it will take a person, one step shy of a genie or a magician, right? To get, to repair that, all that she has destroyed in the time that she's been here. That when you talk about mistrust and you talk about the government, just moving with an iron fist and not caring and not communicating with the fishermen, that is a prime example of what I'm talking about. A liaison. They never had a hand in it. The person was hired, and then they were told, position was never advertised. Ever. They hand-picked this person. And when the fishermen question, "Oh, well I called her previous employer." She worked for Coral World. Some, an agency that the fishermen are constantly doing brawl with. Right? And then, when you look, I remember I got a call back in April of last year. And they were like, "Interviewee. You have a choice of either being the liaison or being the administrator of the fishery disaster aid." And I said, "I'll take the disaster aid." Because that is something Alexis, Matt and myself started. I wanted to finish it. Well of course Nicole screwed me over with that. But besides the point, so I said, "Okay, well make sure that the liaison person you hire, is somebody that's a fishermen trust." And then she just went and did this craziness. So now the fishermen are like, "Listen, if we don't see Interviewee, Interviewee's face in this, you're going to have a problem. You will have a problem because we don't trust her. We don't know her." So that's the kind of thing that Nicole is doing. And I think by the time her tenure is over, it's just going to be, there's just going to be really bad. Because like I said, the commissioner himself, he has no desire to mend the fences. One of the reasons why I left Fish and Wildlife, and retired in such a hasty manner is because I had worked with the commissioner as a director, right? I would sit in these meetings together. And I knew that he is the type of person I could never work for, because I'm so pro fishermen. But not that I'm jaded. I'm blinded by them. Don't get me wrong. But when it comes to advocating for them, whether it be good or bad, I'm all for it. He and I would have never worked, because he doesn't care for fishermen. So the director of Fish and Wildlife spends 30% of their responsibility is dealing with the fishermen and 85% of the money is fisheries related. So it would always be a head counting thing for me. And I have had enough years, that I could retire and maxed out the retirement system. Right? So I just decided to leave, but never in my wildest dream would I think that they would hand it off to an individual like Nicole. I look at Fish and Wildlife and the relationship was like tie in your shoes, lace in your shoes. She has painstakingly just undone all the shoelaces and pulling them out of the hole, the loops in your shoes. Just undoing it strand by strand. Yeah. And now a shoeless shoe, just flopping along, and if it stays on your foot, it stays on your foot. And if it doesn't, it doesn't and she doesn't care, neither does the commissioner. That's the best way I could describe it. I'm so glad you ladies called me. I was thinking when you called, I was like, "God damn it, I got to get up off my afternoon nap," but I'm glad I did. Yeah, well I'm wound up now. But it's really broad, it's made me think and made my mind go places that it hasn't gone ever and in a long time. I think it's really important what you guys are doing, whether it, you know, not everything's going to work in the fishermen's favor, right? But the best thing we can do for them is just be a hundred percent honest, give it to them the way it is, and you'll be surprised, these guys will rally together and say, "We got to do something" and they'll do it. They really will, but you just have to shoot straight with them at a minimum, and you're as good as gold.

So if you guys know somebody that's really, really honest, who's not a shady individual that wants to come down here and spend some time educating these guys. You know part of the corporative statistics money that Fish and Wildlife get, there's 15% of the money and I think they get maybe $175,000 a year. 50% of that money is to be used for education, and it sure was used when I was there, but since Nicole, it hasn't been used at all. In fact, Alexis and Nicole don't see eye to eye because I think she's intimidated by Alexis' brilliance. So she's putting off her nose right at her face and now she's at odds with Nancy Cummings and her crew about making sure that the biostatistical sampling continues to take place.

It's just the way it's going, the defense of your fishery is only as good as your data, right? So if you have these gaping holes in your data, right? What I did for four years was just data, data, data, data, data. I mean, I hammered it, hammered it, hammered it. So if you look at my four years, you'll just see this data, like, oh my God, like, wow. I mean, if I heard something at a council meeting, like they needed to collect data on the recreational fishery, bam. I went back to the office and, "Listen, we're going to start doing this, this, this, this, this." So you'll see the data from my four years, because I had a commissioner that was very supportive. He showed up to the council meetings, she heard what they had to say, she was like, "Interviewee, this is your wheelhouse, run with it." So you'll see a really, really good data set, and then all of a sudden, Nicole gets there and if you take a look at the data to the four years, the same period of time, because remember now, well, let's just say post hurricane, so let's say 2018, okay? That's a full year at 2018. If you take a look at the poor sampling data and the recreational data collected for the whole of 2018 and compare month to month from 2019 to 2018, you will see, you will go, "No way, Interviewee." Nicole refused to collect any data. And Alexis tried and tried and tried, and they would go maybe two or three times a month. I had them going two or three times a day. Because I knew that that data was the only way we could defend or keep the feds off of this fishery, but Nicole, because she has this adversarial relationship that she created with the fishermen, she doesn't want to deal with them, well that really creates a problem when it comes to management, and that's really sad. Before, we have years and years of data, gaps in data, where we were doing so well and we were able to get the feds to compromise, maybe the buffer and the scaler, because we had data that we could prove. Now we don't have anything.

Speaker 1: Interviewee, how do you think that will be justified, that gap collection?

Speaker 2: I don't know. I think first of all, the last council meeting that I went to in August, we tried to push the commissioner to produce support sampling numbers and the only person that can produce them is Alexis because Alexis is a custodian of that dataset, and I called Alexis and, "Alexis, you got a call about a poor sampling number?" She's like, "No." So he pretty much made the council think he called for them, but he never did. The two things we wanted was the port sampling month by month, and we also wanted the landings totals month by month, and he never called for them and the council went on to something else and just completely forgot about it. So between Nicole and the commissioner, I don't think the fishermen really stand a fighting chance. I think they are the two individuals that would go to a council meeting and vote on something that just wouldn't sit well with the fishers. The only chance we have is Tony and Julian because they're there at the council meetings and I know neither one of them would stand for something like that. But it's just really sad. It's really sad. It's bad. It's really bad and I wish someone would... I might have the Fishermen's Association send a formal request to the council or to Noah for those comparisons to be made and the justification would be that we're only as good as our data, and we have concerns that the data is not being collected the way it should be. And there's absolutely no justifiable reason because it's the same amount of people that are there now that conducted the poor sampling when I was there, they're still there. It's just Nicole just doesn't see this as a priority, so she doesn't push for it to be done. I guess my hope is Noah would come and sit with the fishermen, not all the fishermen, you know, Julian, Tony, Darrell, the key players that go to the meetings. Myself. Noah would come and have a conversation with us, so they really could see what's taking place here. Instead they continually go to the government and the government has given them this very jaded, very... It's just not a true representation of what's taking place and they always have some ridiculous justification for something. But if they could just come and say, "Listen, we're going to sit a day and we're going to talk to five of you. Tell us really what's going on." That would be the ultimate thing that we could ask for right now. Because when it's all said and done, the hope of the Fishermen's Association was to take the port sampling away from Fish and Wildlife, because we know that we could literally, every fishermen... We have fishermen that had signed up already making a commitment to be port sample every time they go out provided there was someone there, but that commitment was made to the association, not to the government because they don't like Nicole, they don't like the commissioner. So we had that commitment. So our intention was to prove to the feds that we could do better and a more consistent job than the government. But we didn't get there because we're still waiting on this blasted 501(3)(c) status and we're going to try and take it away from them because you can't talk to Nicole, you can't talk to Commissioner [00:10:08 Oriel]. They're just not listening, and the time passes on, and that's data not collected, and that's just not good. That's not good. So, now that I'm home, I have all this time, I still think that I will give it a try. Because I think it's something that if we do it now, when everybody's at home and we can work it out, then once we go back to a norm, we may be a complete whole different definition of norm by the time this COVID-19 is over. Whatever the norm is, we can go back to it and we can come at it doing something different and something more productive, and that's what I want. And I think I will still make the case because I know Alexis and I speak to each other all the time, and Alexis is always calling me, "Interviewee, I am so frustrated. We're not collecting any data. We're not doing this. We're not doing that." So I know it's not being done. The random sampling, Alexis tried to get Nicole to understand that it has to continue. She came up with some reason why there's no need to do it, dah, dah, dah, dah, dah, and it's just, it's crazy. Nancy Cummings may be a whole lot of things, but that's one smart lady. She may be cookie as a jailbird in a closet, but she's a good statistician and she knows data and you have to give her that, and if she's telling you, "Listen, we really need this random to take place," she knows what she's talking about, so you tip your hat to the experts and you go, "All right," you know?

She's with Noaa I think in St. Pete. She's a person in charge of the bio statistical assembling unit. There's her, I think Steve Turner left, a guy named David Glockner, and some other people. I think Clay Porch is in charge of the unit now. But those are the people that need to come here and sit with five people and have a constructive, educated conversation about what's taking place, and if the federal government is truly and solely concerned in the collection of data, then it doesn't matter... Let me rephrase that, as long as the people collecting the data are doing it the way it should be done, it shouldn't matter who it is, whether it's the government or the Fishermen's Association. To me, the most important thing is just getting it done and getting it done the right way. But I probably still will write Nancy an email. I think something has to happen to let them know because Alexis is not going to do it because Alexis has her job and Nicole to tend with. So I still think I'm going to do it and I'm just going to ask Nancy, "I'm confident and solid just due to comparison, take a look at the poor sampling numbers prior to the hurricane, even a year after the hurricane and where you are now, it's just not working, and they would be negligent to know that is not happening and do nothing to correct it. That's just as bad as the fishermen not allowing their catch to be sampled."

No problem. I mean, I'm one of those few people that could tell you from the government's standpoint and from the fishermen's standpoint. It's always there. If people want to ask questions or want to know what's going on, you know I'm going to tell you the way it is. I'm not going to put sugar on it for me to tell you exactly what's going on, but I guess my thing to both of you is if at the end of it all, if you guys can help these guys in any way, whether it's more education or just getting people to understand, they're hurting and these are the reasons why they're hurting, we're going to help them in any way, I would be forever indebted to both of you. Because as it stands right now, it's to the point now, should this administration change in the years to come, I would probably forgo my retirement to go back to Fish and Wildlife just to try and fix what Nicole and JP destroyed. I would literally come out, I would give it up and come back out and fix it. You know, when I was leaving, I reached out to a guy named Brent Stofle. Brent is... you know him?

Okay. Brent tried his utmost best to have a conversation with Commissioner Oriel to become the Director of Fish and Wildlife, and he called him six times, he emailed him four times, even when he was in St. Croix doing something, I forget, to somebody, he tried to have a conversation with the commissioner and, blew him off. Blew him off. And Brent would have been the perfect person because Brent, yes, he understands the fishermen's plight, he's the person that helped us be designated as a fishing community. Brent also is going to be very, very honest about it. He's going to make sure that even if it not be in the fishermen's favor, Brent is going to find a way to fix that, to make it where it's a pill that the fishermen can swallow. He would have been the perfect person for me to hand it over to, because where he has that massive amount of education and experience in socioeconomics. He could have taken this fishery community to places that it's never seen before, and it's really sad that JP blew him off.

Yes, he would have [been great]. I remember him, he called me, he goes, "Interviewee, these fishermen want me there?" I'm like, "Yo listen, man, we've already reached out to these guys. They're waiting for you, brother. We're waiting for you." "All right, I'll give JP a call." He had discussed it with his family, with his boss, the whole nine yards, and JP blew him off. For Nicole, madness. We even sent Brent's name to the governor. "Please reach out to this man. He has the brains and the heart. He's a perfect fit for the director" and nobody acknowledged that guy.