Key Informant Interview 11 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Government

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location:

Speaker 1: Just from your perspective, or for your perspective, I'll give you a little bit of my background. Okay, I was employed by the division of Fish and Wildlife [...] based here on St. Croix since this is where my office is located. [...] So, I did commercial fisheries data collection, fisheries independent projects through CMAP. I did Department of Interior Recreational Fisheries Assessment, and a number of recreational fisheries projects involving artificial reefs, SADs, things of that nature. I was involved in a redraft of the commercial fisherman licensing and regulations, as well as a draft of the recreational fishing licensing program, neither of which have come to fruition as yet. So, the commercial side of things, the local regulations involving commercial fisheries were established in 1972 and they have not undergone a complete revision since that time, and it's a great thing he did.

Speaker 1: I also just had a quick question. I'm sorry, Interviewee. So, Interviewee you were employed by the federal government then?

Speaker 2: No, that's incorrect. I was a local hire. The government of the Virgin Islands was a local hire under the Department of Natural Resources.

Speaker 1: Okay. And are you from St. Croix or did you relocate there?

Speaker 2: I am not from St. Croix. [...]

Interviewer1: So, Interviewee, in all our questions we're going to be asking in general US Virgin Islands, but of course you know you can make a distinction between St. Croix and St. Thomas and john whenever you would like or you can just focus on St. Croix. It's whatever you feel more comfortable with. So, would you say that US Virgin Islands coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries in your perspective?

Speaker 2: Absolutely. I believe Brent Musburger did work on this a number of years ago in looking at how dependent and these islands were in these communities on fishing. Yes, very much so. As a matter of fact, none of these of the seafood that's harvested here is exported. It's all consumed locally. As a matter of fact, we have seafood that are imported here as well. There's only one trade of time that there were exports, and that was in the early 80s. There were 19 longline vessels out of southeastern US fishing in the Caribbean and St. Croix was the first US port that they came to, and we had large body jets in which they could then send their catch up fresh to the States. There is there is local trade between the islands. We have resources here in St. Croix, typically comped, that may be sent to St. Thomas, and I know there have been reports of some being sold in Puerto Rico. But basically everything is consumed locally.

Interviewer1: Okay, and would you say that US Virgin Islands fishermen are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihoods?

Speaker 2: Yes, absolutely. I'd like to preface all my questions, all my answers rather, to St. Croix because there are some slightly different situations that are exist in St. Thomas that I know that you'll get a little different viewpoint on so I think that would be best for me to do. Yes, there is a strict group of fishermen, commercial fishermen, who are totally dependent on us for their livelihood. There are other individuals who may also have commercial licenses that fish more on a part time basis, and are employed elsewhere, like since the refinery is gearing up now, these individuals would most likely be employed primarily there yet still retain that license so they could fish personally on weekends, or when they have time off.

Interviewer1: Okay, and would you say that St. Croix coastal communities are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2: Absolutely. Not only for their fisheries but also for their protection against the onslaught of wave energy generated by major storm events.

Speaker 1: Interviewee, this is Interviewer and I wanted to ask you know a few questions. So, my first question is, so what would you say are the major problems that are facing fisheries in St. Croix?

Speaker 2: Well, I have to look at this at sort of a different perspective because I am no longer employed by the Division of Fish and Wildlife. I'm no longer directly involved in the fishery except I do participate as a member of the St. Croix Fisheries Advisory Committee for the island and I am part of the district advisory panel for sync life with the council. Major issues affecting the fishery today, a number of years ago while I was employed, individuals were using gill and trammel nets to harvest, primarily Parrot fishes and Acanthurus Surgeonfish. During that period of time the, I think there were over 30 individuals involved as my memory was correct, involved in this particular fishery. The fishery had transcended from a trap fishery to, what was primarily a trap fishery for decades, to a net fishery diving fishery, I think, Diving fishery. Well, I should say we had a period of almost a decade of hurricanes. There were six or eight hurricanes, either directly, or almost directly, hit St. Croix, and as such it devastated the trap fishery, and the trap fishery never really recovered from that. There were no opportunities for loans from the government from the federal side, or from the territorial side, and fishermen saw the fact that their losses were greater when they had gear that has to remain in the water, and purveyors of fishing gear from the southeast came to St. Croix and pushed the use of nets. The divers developed a very unique way of deploying gill nets and trammel nets. Not from boats, from underwater using scuba gear in areas that if you drop them off the side of a boat would get found in the bottom, but the divers were able to use these nets deployed from mesh bags and intercept Parrotfish going from feeding grounds to nesting grounds. And nets were primarily used in the early evening right before dark, and the fisherman identified these so called highways that the fish used, and they were very effective in getting entire breeding schools of parrotfish, to the point where there was a tremendous amount of wanton waste. It took, I don't know, it must have been five years in order to get a regulation passed to ban the use of this gear. However, there are still people using it today, and that is currently a problem. St. Croix has become a primarily a dive fishery. There are very few individuals that fish traps anymore. Where once there might have been five or 6000, now perhaps, less then 1000. For fishing which this specific year. So, the fishery transcended very quickly from trap oriented, which indiscriminately harvested fish, whatever went into the trap, and many individuals who fish trapped and did well catching parrotfish, fished with quotas that they were filling who they sold to. Fish that they didn't want, they just returned over the side and the fish lived. However, the divers with the nets didn't remove fish from the nets until they were at home, when the nets were brought back into the boat, taking home, whatever it was in the net was dead, whether they wanted it or not. So, there was a significant amount of by-catch [inaudible 00:19:00] net is still used today. Enforcement is a big issue here. The enforcement officers and you'll be speaking to, I'm sure someone directly from the enforcement, they will tell you they've had a tremendous problem with courts and Judges, actually fining [inaudible 00:19:34] for the violations. So, they've lost heart in pursuing a lot of that. There are a lot of loopholes that are present in the current regulations that allow individuals to get away. As I said before, the fishery primarily now ensures a diving fishery, and there are more individuals involved in this fishery than just the commercial fishing numbers indicate because each individual has one or more helpers that can harvest the same amount as they do as well. So, the actual numbers involved in this fishery maybe two or three times what's actually represented, and to me, if there's one thing that you could do that would bring the refish resources back closer to the shoreline, is to take the tanks off all recreational and commercial individuals from harvesting resources, and that is the only thing that will save our fisheries, and unfortunately, this has become a cultural norm now. Prior to the early 1980s, it was up. But other things, fishermen are very unique and they know their business very well and they know what works and what doesn't work, and you can't blame them for finding this other way of harvesting but the reefs these days are certainly not in good condition. They haven't been for decades, and the resources are nowhere near as plentiful as when I first came here.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, Interviewee you have mentioned a couple of things regarding some of the major problems facing the fisheries including the gear change, and enforcement, and then the number the actual number of fishers. Can you rank them in order of importance based on what you think is the most significant of problems?

Speaker 2: Well, let's see, I would probably say the use of scuba gear is number one, overall lack of enforcement, two, nets, three. From the recreational side of things, in order to legally sell fish in the Virgin Islands you have to have a commercial fishing license. That license, or I should say, that permit is issued through the Department of Planning and Natural Resources. They also have to have a business license from the CLA, the Department of Licensing and Consumer Affairs in order to sell fish on the street. However, you have a lot of individuals that recreationally fish from boats. When they have a good day of fishing, they are on the cell phone before they reach shore, contacting restaurants to sell those fish, and they take the market away from the true licensed commercial fishery, and this has been a big problem over the years. Individuals fishing and fishing tournaments, they do the same thing. And transactions occur at the dock also between a commercial fisherman buying catch from a recreational fisherman so that he can, in turn, resell it. There's no system of checks and balances with requiring a restaurateur to keep records of who he buys his fish from and that he buys his fish only from commercial fishermen. So, anyone can call, and I've held a commercial fishing license since 1982, and I've never, when I've had the occasion to do well and catch fish, I've never had anyone ever asked me to show them a license. From the broader international scale, we have large fishing vessels from foreign countries permitted to use ports on other island nations, east of us, to set longline gear in their waters, which drastically reduces the amount of seasonal pelagic fish, tuna, dolphin, wahoo that are available for harvest here. And one of the projects that I was involved in, the installation of fisher tracker devices, large 50 meter diameter spheres with radar reflectors and lights that were anchored in mortar up to 10,000 feet in depth offshore. St. Croix is unique in that respect that it has deep water very close to shore. Established a very effective program in aggregating these fish when they were seasonally abundant for harvest at these fish buoys for commercial and recreational fishers. Well, the government program has fallen by the wayside in the last 14, 15 years so that basically St. Croix has none of these fisher tracker police, but yet, the program has continued in St. Thomas. I guess I'm kind of getting ahead of myself here with this. [crosstalk 00:26:53] when you ask the questions, I'll try to keep them short.

Speaker 1: So, the next question is, what would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in St. Croix fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Well it would definitely be the impact of disease, storms, global warming on the condition of the coral reefs, overharvesting of inshore resources. And the lack of updated regulations, and enforcement of those.

Speaker 1: What would you say are the major environm. changes that have occurred in STX in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Environmental changes, that would have to be coastal development, the lack of a one tier system, specifically. Virgin Islands have what's called a two tier system for Coastal Zone Management Development. Those that developed in the first tier are subject to much stricter regulations than those in the second tier, or further distance from the coast. However, because of the nature of being on a small island, what is done in the second tier also drastically impacts the first year area and consequently the inshore waters. So, lack of a one tier management plan for coastal zones development of projects that have altered the shoreline, such as industrial developments, the refinery, and South Shore of St. Croix, the alumina plant that is has been defunct for many years, but because of the red mud, the byproduct of the processing of bauxite, that leech aid continues to affect the inshore waters. The contamination of groundwater resources by the refinery, besides just the physical construction of it in terms of altering and eliminating the largest mangrove estuary on the island. We have a number of coastal ponds around St. Croix that, in the past, served as nursery grounds for fisheries. However, presently. They do not because they have prematurely aged due to a planned development, and the runoff trolling these areas and including them in many cases. Well I should also mention the rum effluent from the distilleries on St. Croix that is discharged, and actually seen videos of this plume, this flocculent plume that occludes the ambient light from reaching the bottom and smothers the Benthic community from direct impact. I think I had mentioned storms before. In '83 we had, I think was '83, we had a die off of the long spine diadema sea urchin, diadema antillarum, the major invertebrate raiser on the coral reefs. Eliminated 99.9% of those. They're still not back nearly the numbers that they were. This organism can get the algo growth down and allowed the coral campanulate to settle and grow. That coupled with overharvesting of herbivorous fishes, and you've got a dire problem in regard to coral reef development.

Speaker 1: Okay. Have you observed any changes in the St. Croix fisheries and/or the environments that you think can be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: [inaudible 00:33:45] the, of course, the elevated water temperature has adversely impacted coral reefs to the point where most of the coral reefs are dead due to bleaching events, and if not a bleaching events, then weakened and affected by other coral diseases. In terms of a new threat to coral reef fisheries, of course we have the... The name escapes me now. Lionfish. And that's something that, of course, we can't control. We're going to have to live with those numbers. Divers do a good job in reducing inshore numbers in areas that they frequent, but numbers are quite evident offshore from fishermen who use fish traps and are fishing at depth.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, Interviewee, in your opinion, are St. Croix fisher's concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I think it's something that they may be aware of, but it's not a pressing issue with them. They may not attribute the climate change to impact directly on the fish that they harvest. It may be the fact that some of them certainly do, the more knowledgeable individuals, but others would simply say we're harvesting as much as we did before, but they may be going greater distances from shore, or using a different fishing method covering greater area, or have more individuals helping them to try to harvest the same amount.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, then in your opinions are St. Croix fishery managers, researchers and decision makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I know they're concerned about it. I'm not totally aware of what they're doing about it. I don't feel that it's on the top burner them. Well, the local government struggles in it's programs. They're certainly not up to capacity. At least no where near when I worked for them, and I'm not telling myself on the back here, but there have been changes in administration, of actually the current commissioner in there is very good and very knowledgeable, but with limited capacity, there's only so much it could do.

Interviewer1: So, we do have a few questions about relationships between different stakeholders, and you work, of course, based off of your perception. How would you describe the relationship between fishers and other fishers in St. Croix? So, how are their relationships amongst themselves?

Speaker 2: Well, I really think this is something that would be better answered by individuals involved in the fishery. I would only be able to give an outside perspective on this. Fishers are very independent individuals, and they develop their own market and their own means of supplying that market. They certainly don't like other honing in on their market, or methods, or gear. Well, I guess that I think that's something better answered by individuals from the fishery.

Interviewer1: Absolutely, and again, this is something if you can think of any examples of fishers getting together to address an issue, from your experience, have you ever seen that happen and can you think of any specific examples?

Speaker 2: Oh certainly. In regard to the banning of gill and trammel nets, that was a very contentious issue. As I said, there were initially 39 individuals that may have been using this gear, and I was involved in a buy-back program once the nets and gear were banned, and this was a very contentious issue because there was a lot of money that was being made by these individuals, and the fact that they weren't going to be able to use this gear anymore because of the amount of time that they had been using the gear, years, and they say the profits, they made investments in their fishery. They bought bigger boats, they bought new vehicles, they had house payments they were making. It was a very contentious issue. There were individuals that were directly involved in the fishery that saw the hard that it was doing, and it became somewhat of a problem for these individuals who were pro-net banned to leave their vehicles, to leave their vehicles and trailers ashore and be out all day fishing, and perhaps not comeback and find the vehicle to operate. So, it was a very contentious issue. Was it handled properly? The government did what they could do, and provided buy-back money based upon the amount of landings that the fishermen reported, however, many fishermen didn't report accurately or at all. So, that was the biggest issue, I think, I was involved in when I was with Fish and Wildlife.

Interviewer1: Okay, and how would you describe the relationship between the fishers and the fishery managers in St. Croix?

Speaker 2: Well, they certainly had their ups and downs. I should say fishermen have also gotten together and discussed a recreational licensing program and they've done this at forums. The relationships between managers and fishers? It really depends upon who's at the helm here in Fish and Wildlife, and how quickly they respond to concerns of the fishermen, and doing whatever they can generally do to assist the fishers. One of the things I know I did, I helped out when I was in the office here was to help fishermen apply for small business development loans as part of a courtesy. It all depends who's there and who can help out, and if there is anyone there that can help out.

Interviewer1: So, you were talking about the relationship between the fishermen and the local managers. Is there a difference if we were to talk about the relationship between the fishermen and the federal level managers, or is it similar?

Speaker 2: Well, fishermen have, really to see the change in constituency in the Caribbean Fishery Management Council over time has been very interesting and very much aware now of how important it is to have commercial fishers represented on that body. I think that they've made giant strides in working with the local fishermen, but I think the local fishermen

look at the feds as, even more so, as regulators, and because of quotas that are in place now, of further wanting to reduce those quotas.

Interviewer1: Okay, and I know you have talked a little bit about this, but can you think of any specific examples of the fishermen and fishery managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Well, they've done this over quotas. They've done this over licensing, both recreational and commercial. They've done this over gear restrictions.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, Interviewee, do you feel that fishery management in St. Croix is fair in the decisions they make?

Speaker 2: If fisheries management is fair in the decisions that they make? I think that the managers are now taking more into consideration in regard to the impacts on commercial fishermen then they have, perhaps, in the past in dealing primarily with just the resources.

Speaker 1: Okay, and if it's applicable, can you make a distinction between the local and the federal government?

Speaker 2: I think that's pretty much the same at both levels. Yeah, they are very much aware of more of impact to the industry, the individual now. Think have become a bit more complicated over the years, and the fishermen now have a much stronger voice then they've had in the past.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, do you think most fishers in St. Croix understand how fishing managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: I think they do. I think there's quite a bit of communication that goes on before management decisions are made. There's quite a bit of input that's received. I think that the administration desires to have that information first before making decisions.

Speaker 1: Okay. So, if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and fishers resolved?

Speaker 2: Well, I'm sure they exist. In the past, some have been resolved in very violent ways. Fishermen who have, as an example. in the trap fishery fishermen have found others that have been holding their traps and making a living off their traps before they can. They've taken drastic measures to stop that from happening and individuals have not been found again. It gets to the extreme. I think more, these days, it's a matter of mutual respects. If there's something that they disagree on, they're not going to hide it, and they're going to address it directly with that individual, and there are confrontations that occur at the fish market here, and that's something that the commercial fishermen can provide more information on.

Speaker 1: Right. Gosh. Okay, and then thinking about the same question, if they exist, how conflicts between fishers, and fishery managers resolved? And fishery managers. Usually through forums that are held in which the direction that the managers would like to take are discussed, and then the views of the fisherman are provided, and hopefully there's a middle of the road that they can reach. So, the bottom line is the fisherman wants to maintain his livelihood. The fishermen are very good at what they're doing, but they have a tendency to, some of them anyway, to work themselves towards extinction. Meaning they would harvest as much as they can as often as they can. Other more knowledgeable individuals basically don't harvest anything more than they can't sell. It varies to extremes.

Interviewer1: So, Interviewee, these are all our questions. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to add?

Speaker 2: I think that basically covered most of everything. St. Croix has approximately, 20% of its fishable waters inshore in some form of protection, and yet, that just doesn't seem to be enough. There was, a number of years ago, there was an expansion of the Buck Island monument island monument. Buck Island is an island that's about a mile offshore, also northeast, end the St. Croix, and it's was established as a national park, and the waters are protected around it, initially, primarily to the east, in what they call the Green Garden area Gordon area, in the, I believe it was the end of Clinton's administration, that monument was expanded by something like 18,000 underwater acres. It was expanded under the guise of protecting coral reefs, but on the north side of the island, the coral reefs don't exist beyond 300 foot in depth and the waters go beyond 5000 feet. There was a very productive session area in these offshore waters migratory pelagic species, tuna, dolphins, and wahoo. As a matter of fact, Fish and Wildlife even had a locally permitted to territorially permitted in a federally permitted fisher tracker buoy in these waters, but with the expansion of the monument, we lost that and the fishermen lost their livelihood. So, as times, decisions are made by several authorities to the extremes, where as there are no extractive uses from this now expanded monument. In St John's, the use and harvest of commercial fisheries by commercial fishermen was taking a consideration in their monumental expansion, and certain fishing permitted. So, the federal agencies have left a bad taste in the mouths of commercial and recreational fishers. Every time that federal agencies get involved, the fishermen look at it as, "Now what do they want from us? Now they're going to reduce our quotas, or fishable areas, or whatever."