Key Informant Interview 14 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Government

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location: St Thomas

Speaker 1: Okay, great. All right, so could you just start by describing a little bit your involvement with a US Virgin Island fisheries?

Speaker 2: Yeah, sure. [...]The way that the state government works in the Virgin Islands is, I guess, in governance called an assembly type of governance. So we have a commissioner who has many divisions, and then directors that each manage their specific area. And so within our division, we have both wildlife fisheries and education. Our fisheries division manages both the commercial and recreational fisheries as well as the habitats that support those fisheries. [...]

Speaker 1: Now getting into some of our questions, more specific to the fisheries in the USVI, would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries, in your opinion?

Speaker 2: No. The Caribbean fishery is so degraded, we import 99% of our food stuffs. Our watersheds are highly degraded and full of sediment. That washes into the oceans and degrades coral reefs. I think that we rely on imports, and we are not sustainable communities in any way. And that's largely because of a couple of things. I think first that degradation of the environment that I spoke of, but also the lack of access by most people to participating in the

commercial fishery. And then in the recreational fishery, you have to have a boat. It's super expensive to have a boat to get it down the water. If you handline, your handlining small fish, not enough to feed your family. So lots of people do fish for "subsistence", quote-unquote, but not in the numbers that, not in numbers, I think, that substantially impact our communities per se. And that's kind of for purpose of this study and not something I'd [inaudible 00:07:32] .

Speaker 1: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Would you say that the USVI fishermen are highly dependent on fisheries for the livelihoods, so those who fish?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah. So we have, probably, 50% of our fishermen that are registered are active, and probably a quarter of those are full-time fisherman. Everyone else is part-time. For that quarter, which is fewer than 50 people in the entire territory, so 50 people are 100% dependent on the fishery, and then everyone else has second jobs and other occupations.

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

Speaker 2: I guess it depends on what sense. For ecosystem ,services sure. For tourism, absolutely. For day-to-day survival, probably not.

Speaker 3: So hi, Nicole, this is Karen, and I was just going to ask you a few of the questions on our survey list. I know you had talked a little bit about environmental degradation already, but I just wanted to ask, what would you say are some of the major problems that are facing fisheries and us Virgin islands?

Speaker 2: I think biggest problem facing the fishery is a lack of regulation in the recreational fishery. Therein lies the big enforcement problem, because we have different recreational commercial laws, because we don't even have a licensing program. It's difficult to get information out to recreational fishers and also difficult to make contact with folks who are using those resources in any kind of systematic way. You can advertise in the newspaper, et cetera, et cetera, but people then have to be willing participants in the fishery and in being good citizens and stewards of their environment. That's outreach component, I guess, for us. Then the other, I guess, big issue is the fact that because of that lack of mandatory participation, we really are super data deficient. So we honestly just have no idea what's happening. We can model it all day, but we don't have the boots on the ground.

Speaker 3: Okay. If you had to rank these different issues that you mentioned, which do you think you would consider number one and number two as being the major problems in order of their importance?

Speaker 2: Probably, I would say almost certainly the lack of systematic licensing program is the biggest problem. 2) Increasing data collection to inform fishery staff assessments, and... Yeah.

Speaker 3: Okay. What would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the US Virgin Islands fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: I would say there are probably like three things I'll mention. The first is, the huge and enormous loss of corals that impact... So there's structure, but not actual living support structure in our coral reefs for reef fishes. And that has been due to coral disease, coral bleaching, and also human direct impacts to reefs, whether it be from boat

racks, hurricanes that move debris around, et cetera. Yeah, and then the second would be the closure of certain areas for spawning has been a positive change in the fishery. I know we see some grouper and hind species rebounding, which is exciting and a really positive conservation success, I think. But then third would probably be a decline in the actual number of fishers, but a huge increase in effort in which they increase in traps and other kinds of technologies for fishing. And so I guess that's kind of nuanced. It's neither positive nor negative, right?

Speaker 3: Okay. Right. Okay. 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: I guess the biggest one is just development overall, because there were different changes on each island. As related for the fishery, I think the increase in development has been significant. And also with that increase in development comes gentrification of many places and displacement of local peoples and communities.

Speaker 3: Okay. Have you observed any changes in the US Virgin Island fisheries and/or the environment that you think are attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: Yeah, definitely. The seasonality, the tropics are awesome, because we have these cool wet seasons, but they're completely unpredictable it feels like now. And that's being backed up by some rain and temperature data, so the predictability, time, and place of reproducing populations is not changing at the same rate as the change in... You said climate, but did you mean weather? Okay. So yeah, I guess the climate is changing, and species are going to be impacted by that, because they're not, they have these historic evolved migration patterns and knowledge of resource aggregation, and that has been changing because of changes in things like rainfall and temperature.

Speaker 3: Okay. In your opinion, do you think the US Virgin Islands' fishers are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: That's so hard, because anyone's worried about changes in the fishery, but the synergy of so many different impacts makes it... How I knew or heard people say, "Oh, climate change blah blah blah," and talk about the weather, but I'm not necessarily sure if they're attributing that to the greater umbrella of climate change.

Speaker 3: Okay. How about, in your opinion, do you think fishery managers, and researchers, and decision makers are concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: Oh yeah. Yeah, I'm sorry. Yeah, I think we are, but there are just so many, like in so many states, just so many little fires to put out, but there is this definite move towards hiring a climate resiliency coordinator, putting in artificial reefs to correct some of these changes that we're finding based on the increased environmental degradation, and thinking outside of the box and ways to preserve the reefs. I think a lot of that though is driven by the impacts it will have to tourism rather than the impact it will have on the fishery.

Speaker 1: Nicole, we have a couple of questions about some of the relationships between different stakeholders. And again, this is just based off of your perception, how would you describe the relationship between fishers in the USVI, so how fishers relate to each other?

Speaker 2: I think everybody knows everyone. I think there's some competition in some small ways, but in general, people are supporting one another and are trying to think of ways to have the next generation participate despite moratorium on commercial licenses. Probably have helper licenses has assisted with that. And then, I think there's some contentious relationships just like in any small community. Everyone knows one another. There aren't that many of them.

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

Speaker 2: Yeah, of course. So we have the... There are several nonprofit organizations that have been together for some short periods of time, just banded for a while and come back together. Those have been related to things like creating the moratorium on licenses, trying to push the government to open up the fish market, this is over past 20 years, and provide input for ecosystem-based fishery management plans, both through the federal district advisory panels, as well as the territorial Fishery Advisory Committees. Our territorial committees meet monthly and the VIP meets quarterly. So we definitely have fishers coming to all of those meetings. The St. Thomas fishers banded together last year to protest the nomination of our current commissioner, so there's one thing, but yeah, they definitely come together for lots of different kinds of causes.

Speaker 1: And what about more socially, are there any events or festivals, or any community examples of the fishers getting together in that sense?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Most of the commercial fishers participate in the tournaments, both in the USVI up in St. Thomas and St. Croix, but also in the BVI. There are fish markets that happened. People get together to sell fish at the same times in different areas. There's going to be a lionfish derby, and there'll be quite a few commercial and recreational fishers working there. And then there are sport fish recreational clubs, both in, I think there are two in St. Thomas, and then there's one here.

Speaker 1: Okay. How about the relationships between the fishers and the fishery managers in the USVI, how would you describe that?

Speaker 2: Yeah, there's a few distinctions. So the commercial fishers, on average, 65 years old across the territory. They've been here for a very, very long time, and they've seen many managers come and go, many. So they're quite distrustful of fishery management, but that happens everywhere. However, they do participate. Many do participate in the different advisory panels. There are plenty of opportunities have input. They all come and attend annual registration, preregistration meeting, and then appreciate us getting there. And then there's tons of broad fishers, as they come in, and they're nice. For the most part, it's fine and it's good, but I think to have new regulations and things, there's a lot of distrust. The recreational fishers haven't had as much interaction with the Division of Fish and Wildlife. They have more interaction with Environmental Enforcement who manages both the mooring, the boating safety, and infraction data. And then for some of the protected areas, they also are more interacting with EE than they are with any kind of outreach or specific fishery management.

Speaker 1: Would you say there's a... Is there a distinction or a difference between relationships between the fishers and the local government versus the federal government, would you say?

Speaker 2: I think that element's interesting right now, because the federal fishery management is done through the Caribbean Fishery Management Council, and their executive director has been there probably six times as long as I've been alive. So there's great trust in that individual, and it seems trust is based on the individual in the position at the time. So that, I've only been here a year, there's not a whole lot of trust with me.

Speaker 1: Okay. I know that you already provided some examples, but are there any other examples that you can think of, of the fishers and the fishery managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Yeah, all those meetings, we all get together. You want a specific issue? All right. The ecosystem-based issuing management plants have a conceptual model component, and so theirs were invited through a series of meetings, and give and provide input on the conceptual models in an exercise that was facilitated by the fisheries' management council. Those have been providing news that happened over the past year, and that provided direct input into the models that will be used for the action plan components of the fishery your management plans.

Speaker 3: Nicole, I just have a few more questions that are focusing on fishery management. Do you feel that fishery management in the US Virgin Islands is fair in the decisions that are made?

Speaker 2: So for local, we generally, and this is just in general, that they see, and each district advises and really drives what the local government decide in the rules and regulations it makes. The FAC drafts those rules and regulations. The FAC is made up of the composition of the folks. There is someone from the charter industry, someone who dives, a marine scientist, a fisher, a commercial fisher, a recreational fisher, and then it's supposed to be a housewife who buys fish, and someone who, maybe, a grocery store owner and someone from the Department of Ag, and someone from the Department of Justice. So that's a diverse committee, and they draft those plans. They submit them to us. And then we make a decision on whether or not we're going to provide them to the legislature. I think in general, we almost always kill their recommendation, which is how we've ended up in this moratorium, the fish trap reduction plan that was poorly implemented, and blah, blah, blah. So I think we are, we act politically to the FAC, but I don't necessarily think that that's a bad thing. I think that's the will of the people, then that's what's most fair and just.

Speaker 3: Okay. And then, as far as the federal government, do you feel that fishery management in the US Virgin Islands is fair in the decisions that they make?

Speaker 2: Well, so they base their data and their decisions in the three to 200 miles outside of the territory on models. Those rules come from the Southeast Science Fisheries Center. There's little to no input from... There's input, and many respond to input, but localized federal decisions, and as soon as with endangered species listings, et cetera, they will respond to every single question, but they will have a good reason as to why they made a decision. So they're not going to change their decisions. I think it's participatory, but I don't think it's fair.

Speaker 3: Okay. Okay. Do you think that most fishers in the US Virgin Islands understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: No. I think it's just because they're really busy, they would have to... First off, they're really busy. Second of all, we don't explain it clearly. So I'm hoping to do that during the commercial fisher venues this year. I don't know. I just don't think people know how these decisions come, and then when they do learn it, they're mad about it. So then they just willfully decide not to understand it. Some of the meetings, the same question gets asked 16 times looking for a different answer. Yeah.

Speaker 3: Okay. And then my last question is, if they do exist, how are conflicts between fishers and between fishers resolved?

Speaker 2: Between fishers and fishers? Fisticuffs. I don't know.

Speaker 3: Okay. How about between fishers and fishery managers, if they exist, how do you think those conflicts are resolved?

Speaker 2: There is often a variety of ways. Some of it just takes time, because if it's about a change, it just takes time for that change to be implemented. Other times, and you accept it. Other times just comes from conversations. The process of building trust is part, if one or both parties don't want it to happen, so sometimes that can happen through having conversations with their higher ups,, or having conversations in the Senate or providing testimony that's very unjust to the Senate, or really it's just face time, so it's showing up to meetings just- ... It's just meetings, and meetings, and meetings, and the managers getting yelled at, and yelled at, and yelled at until finally everyone's done yelling. It's super awesome.

Speaker 1: Nicole, these are all our questions. Is there anything that we didn't talk about that you would like to add? Anything important that comes to mind?

Speaker 2: No, I think it will just be, maybe, important to distinguish between the effects of weather and climate. I think I just, it's hard to know sometimes when you're in it, if you're not looking at a data sheet all the time, it's really just weather in your head, so it's hard to know sometimes. I think that that gradual daunting like, "Oh," this is something that's unusual based on a hundred years of data is hard to comprehend. People say it and they know it, they just don't have a name for it sometimes.