Key Informant Interview 17 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: Government

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location: St Thomas

Speaker 1: All right. Excellent. Okay. So could you describe a little bit to me your involvement with USVI Fisheries?

Speaker 2: We are the enforcement arm for the Department. This consists of 10 divisions within the Department. And we get funding from NOAA through the Joint Enforcement Agreement. To actually collect data from the commercial fishers. Data from the dock site or fish under patrol vessels while they engage in fishing. And then we are also involved in issuing their ID license or the fishing license to the fishers every year. Once they meet the criteria from Fish and Wildlife, meaning that they turn in all the catch reports, and that they're up to date. Then we will be able to issue them based on the documentation that is provided to us. We go ahead and issue the license to those fishers to allow them to fish. And also with that we also provide them with the registration of the vessel, which is absolutely free of charge once they're engaged in fishing. So basically we are the regulatory arm for the local Fish and Wildlife.

Speaker 1:Okay. Excellent. And would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries in general?

Speaker 2: I would say that. Yes, yes, definitely. The commercial fishers that we have here, basically, they're fishing for reef fish and pelagics. But a lot of the restaurants actually cater to a lot of the tourists that comes in and they want seafood. So that's a big selling item in the restaurant industry. You're either looking for lobster, you're looking for snapper, you're looking for just a regular, how should I say, a migratory fish like mahi-mahi or tuna. Yeah. And then also the locals actually enjoy eating a good reef fish, pot fish. And then the species are different within the districts, meaning St. Croix and St. Thomas. St. Croix, the locals eat a lot of parrotfish. And St. Thomas they eat a lot of got a snapper or [inaudible 00:03:54].

Speaker 1: Okay. Yeah. And would you say that USVI fishermen, so the commercial fishermen, would you say that they are highly dependent on fisheries for their livelihood?

Speaker 2: Presently, we have, I would say, in a neighborhood, I'm not talking to the whole territory, we probably have, let's say 210 commercial fishers. And that's full-time. So that's their livelihood. Fishing is a livelihood. So they will be out there fishing six days a week, Monday to Saturday. They don't go fishing on Sundays. But then at the same time you still have a lot of recreational fishing that's going on. And we don't have much data on it. We're starting right now to implement, we haven't implemented it yet, but we're looking at implementing a recreational fishing license. So that'll be part of the criteria is for you to report your catch to the Department either by weekly or monthly. So at least we could have that data, how much fishery is being pulled out of the oceans.

Speaker 1: Yeah. Absolutely. And would you say that USVI coastal communities in general are highly dependent upon coral reefs?

Speaker 2: To a extent, yes, because it brings in, again, it [factors] with tourism. A lot of the tourists come in, they want to actually go out to see live corals. And one of our biggest locations right now for individuals coming from the mainland that actually wants to enjoy a live ecosystem like this, like the coral reef and all that stuff, the National Park Service. Have you been to St. Croix before? National Park Service. Okay. Prime example. Those are areas that if you're now a certified diver you can go out there on a charter. You get out there and you get to see the live corals in a depth of about six to about 20 feet of water. That's secure. It's buffered. For the more advanced, that's diving, you could go off of Christiansted Harbor you get to see all the corals and stuff. So I would say yes.

Speaker 1: Okay. Yep. And what would you say, in your opinion, are the major problems facing fisheries in the USVI right now?

Speaker 2: Well, we're having this problem right now with, there's a moratorium on the commercial fishers. And we shut the system down from since 2000. Guess what's happening? A lot of the older fishers are either coming out of the fisheries because of age or they're dying off. And we're not replenishing those right now. So at one point, let's say early 2000, we probably had like 300 in each district. We're down to now what? 210. The fishing community, the older guys are dying off, and we're not really filling in the void for replenishing those that's no longer in the fisheries. So there's a drastic decline in fishers. Yeah. Now I know our Commissioner is looking at putting a cap on actually the number of fishing license that's going to be, would be able to give out to anyone interested in fishing, but that's down the road. That's not going to happen right now. We still have some logistics that we have to work out. I mean, also, let's say 10 years ago, you could have probably find conch shell, a conch probably in what, 10, 15 feet of water. You got to go a little further out now. So it's a trade off. We implemented trap reductions in regards to the number of traps that we allowing in the ocean right now. So a lot of the fishers that was fishing with, let's say with a hundred traps, no longer have a hundred traps to fish. They're only allowed X amount, if he had a hundred, he'd probably get in anywhere from 45 to 50 traps. So it's cut in half basically. Yeah.

Speaker 1: All right. And so you mentioned a couple of issues. If I asked you to rank them in terms of importance, which would you say would be the most important out of these issues that you mentioned?

Speaker 2: In regards to lack of number of fishers that we have, that would be priority number one, I would say. Number two, will be, ouch, implementing the recreational fishers license. So we can actually capture that data that we're missing. And, number three, will be what, I didn't mention this, but I need more personnel. I need more enforcement arms out there. So that'll be number three. And I didn't mention it to you before, but that's a hot topic. So... You can't be implementing new rules and regs in an industry, and that just require enforcement, and then you don't have the bodies out there to really do the enforcement. So...

Speaker 1: Yeah. That makes sense. And so what would you say are the most, in your opinion, are the most significant changes that have occurred in the USVI fisheries in the last couple of decades? Or earlier?

Speaker 2: A lot of closures from the federal government. Areas that was abundant with fish, that closed either for one reason or the next. [Thanks to] habitat or because of federal waters, whatever. That's one of the biggest issues that we have. When a commercial fisher, back 20 years ago, could have fished around the whole Island, now they're restricted. And that's throughout the whole territory. So their fishing grounds are getting smaller and smaller. Yeah. Well, because of the hurricanes that we had most of the ocean floor has been tremendously disturbed. So a lot of let's say like for the lobsters and the reef fish, well, right now, I guess, they're coming back. But, back, right after that, there was a serious problem because either the bottom was really messed up, the corals then got destroyed. So the habitat for the species, they moved on to someplace else.

Speaker 1: Okay. Okay. All right. And have you observed any changes or have you heard of any changes in USVI fisheries, or the environment, that you think can be attributed to climate change?

Speaker 2: Other than the ocean water is getting warmer and it is causing disease to the corals, like bleaching and stuff. That's about what's going on down here right now. And then there is a next kind of a disease, have taken effect to some of the corals, I'm hearing the territory. But Nicole will be able to provide you with that information. And a more scientific side.

Speaker 1: Right. All right. In your opinion, are USVI fishers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: The older ones probably are. I would say the younger ones are just there to make a buck. But I would think more the older one's, they're seeing the changes. The younger one's have not. To my opinion, they're not. They're just there to make a quick dollar.

Speaker 1: Right. Yeah. And, in your opinion, are USVI fishery managers, researchers, decision-makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: Yes, definitely. We're concerned. Right now there's a major development that's going on the St. Thomas side, on the waterfront, and know the Department actually told them that with climate change the ocean water is going to be getting higher within the next 30, 40 years. And they didn't basically listen to us. So they went ahead and start building a new retaining wall for the waterfront. And within, 2050, the ocean tide is going to be six feet versus, in St. Thomas, versus the three feet height that they actually went and put in the new walls. There is concerns.

Speaker 1: Okay. Yeah. And so how would you describe the relationship between members of the community in the areas where you live and work? So coastal communities, how are typically relationships between people?

Speaker 2: We have a good rapport with the, I would say, the people that lives on the shoreline. That actually see what's going on out there. Because we get calls from them, any illegal activity that's going on, that we get notification from them. They even providing us with pictures now. We need a telescopic lens to identify the vessel and the individual that's out there fishing illegally or fishing in a closed area. I would say there is a lot of awareness within the local community, but those that live on the shoreline, they're well aware of what's going on and they want to protect the resources that's out there. That we get a lot of calls from individuals that's basically interested in saving the resources.

Speaker 1: Okay. And is there a difference in relationships? So if you're describing, well, actually, before I asked you that question, how would you describe the relationship between the fishermen and the fishery managers in the USVI?

Speaker 2: That is a very complex question. Let's put it this way, the fisher feels that the government's supposed to be able to provide them with everything. Everything's supposed to be free for them. So it's like any other fishing community or any state that has a fishing community. Fishers are always fighting to get more for less, but I wouldn't say that we don't have a communication line, there's a communication line. But it's very, I would say, it's fragile. But there are some there that would voluntarily give us information and stuff to that sort. But then there's a handful that's very negative in regards to, the government could never do anything right for them.

Speaker 1: Right. Right. Yeah. And is there a difference in the way that fishermen relate or perceived the local government versus the federal government?

Speaker 2: The commercial fishers have issues with the federal government, especially scientists and stuff that comes in. Because in the past they realized that when they open up and give the scientist some information, they're doing the research and stuff. In a couple of years, that area that they went out to and did their stock assessment and all that stuff,

ends up getting closed. So they're very concerned about sharing any information with the federal government. And I think they're concerned with the local government also. So we work in tandem. So…

Speaker 1: Right. Yeah. And how about relationships between the fishermen themselves? How would you describe that?

Speaker 2: They're very competitive among themselves. But it's always bickering, whatever. If I go out today and I'm family to you, and I catch more fish than you did, you're going to be upset with me. So there's always bickering going on among themselves. But they do get along, it’s like family. One side of the family is always upset with the other side of the family so there's always issues.

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

Speaker 2: Only if it's going to affect their livelihood. I mean, income in their pocket. Then they'll probably band together. We've held several town hall meetings in the past and you only get a handful that actually comes out. They want one individual to be their spokesperson. Instead of showing force by bringing everyone together in a cohesive group to show that they're serious about what's going to affect their pockets or livelihoods. They depend on one individual to be the [spokesperson] for them.

Speaker 1: Okay. How about socially? Do fishermen get along socially at all?

Speaker 2: Well, right now we have a fish market in St. Thomas, in Frenchtown. And there's always issues among themselves. Like I said, because of envy or grudge, because this one individual probably fished more than the other that day. Over here in St. Croix, we're basically remodeling the old fish market that we have here in Lorraine. And that's probably, I would say, 75% completed. So I'm hoping by the time you get down here in July, it should be ready to operate. But we have them close to each other, meaning that they're in the same proximity. Basically they're going to be competing against each other. But at the same time you have individuals, already, that's trying to make contact with us because they want first preferences. You put in your application for your stall and it all depends first come, first serve. But you have individuals that, I don't want number 10 stall, I want the first or the second stall. So it's hard to say that they come together. I haven't seen that in the time that I've been here. And I've been here for a very long time. Because it's basically every man for themselves. Now you might have a group that's fishing as partners, that's one group, but then you have a next group that's actually fishing the species and they don't get along. Yeah. They might talk, yeah, but it's always a bickering. So yeah.

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

Speaker 2: We host FAC meetings, meaning the Fishermen Association, of these fishers. Meeting here in my office every second of the month. And basically it's open to all the commercial fishers. And we don't have that kind of attendance, meaning that the fishers that's commercially efficient they depend on the chairperson to actually be their mouthpiece. But to say they want to, let's say something is coming down, some new regs is coming down, they're not going to be in attendance here to actually support the measure or oppose the measure. Like I said, I don't see them getting along with the chairperson like that. They will quicker get along with Carlos Farchette because they know Carlos from enforcement for many, many, many years. But then he is just one person here in the Committee Board. He could relay the issues that they have, to the chair and to the body, but he's only one vote.

Speaker 1: Right. Yep. So, in your opinion, would you say that the fishery management in the USVI is fair in the decisions they make?

Speaker 2: Yes, I do. Yeah.

Speaker 1: Okay. And is there a distinction, in your opinion, in how you perceive fairness between the local and the federal government?

Speaker 2: Well, I get money from the federal side, so I have to be nice.

Speaker 1: I understand.

Speaker 2: And there is a fairness across the board. It's just, like I said, the local commercial fishers, their main objective is to see what they could get from the government on either side for free. If they're not entitled to, let's say, for instance, getting rental from the facility, the fish market, for peanuts. And it puts a dent in my budget for just the janitorial services, just to maintain the facility.

Speaker 1: Yep. Absolutely. Now do you think that most fishermen in the USVI understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: I would say, to extent, but that's not their concern, their biggest focus is on they're catching the fisheries. And able to sell their products, that they harvest, through the clients. They're not really worried as long, like I said, as long as doesn't affect their pockets, they're not going to worry. I don't see it that way with them. And at the point right now, like I said, we're losing a lot of the older fishers. So there is ways and means to actually try to get into the fisheries by getting one of the older guys to actually transfer their license to them. But it still has to go through the FAC Board, then we have to approve it, and then the Commissioner has to go ahead and sign off on it. And it usually takes a while.

Speaker 1: We're almost done. I just have one more question. So if there are any conflicts between the fishermen and fishery managers, how are they resolved?

Speaker 2: Well, we have a spokesperson for the St. Thomas [inaudible 00:27:51] for the fisheries meetings and stuff. So I don't know if you know Julian Magras? He is basically, okay, but Julian is basically the spokesperson for the St. Thomas fishers to some extent. Okay. And then you've got Eddie Schuster here at St. Croix, who is the chair for the FAC. So I know Julian has been sending a lot of documentation to the Congress lady, to Congress. Hold on a second. Okay. So yeah. So he sent a lot of letters to the Commissioner, to Fish and Wildlife, as to get issues resolved. And a lot of stuff is still pending. I know there's a upcoming meeting because my Commissioner was here this morning. And there is a upcoming meeting, I think, on Monday, next week, where they're going to be meeting with the Council, the CFMC. Or Thomas, with the fisheries, right? And our Department Commissioner. And as regards to a lot of the ongoing issues that's plagues the fisheries. Well, I should say the fishing industry, but the commercial fishers itself.