Key Informant Interview 1 USVI

Date:

Stakeholder Group: NGO

Years of Experience in Occupation/Field:

Community/Area/Location: St. Croix

Speaker 1: I was wondering if you could just give us a little bit of background information on your role.

Speaker 2: [...] I actually started here at this organization as an education coordinator. But previous to that, I also owned a small environmental consulting company. And before that, I worked for the division of fish and wildlife at DPNR, so kind of worked in each of the different sectors, I guess. Yeah. And my background, in terms of just like what I consider myself as an expert at, or what I do best, is actually as a wildlife biologist, although I only do that a fraction of my time these days. So we do, in terms of interacting with coral reefs and fisheries and stuff, probably currently it's mostly in the education realm. We do have things like regular snorkel clinics and snorkel tours, and we have had a marine science summer camp up until COVID. But we do some on the ground conservation work, but it tends to be more land-based, just because there's already a lot of people doing marine stuff. But sometimes it's kind of on the fringing areas, the beaches. We work with sea turtles quite a bit, and mangroves and stuff like that.

Speaker 2: Do you interact with fishers in any of these efforts at all? Or have you?

Speaker 2: We have a little bit. You know, there's always ... Occasionally you have fishers that can come to our education activities, or bring their kids to our education activities. We have tried. It's been a couple years since I was directly involved with the marine science camp, but the leaders have tried to get ... Well, it's a marine science camp, but we also try to include advocacy and kind of conservation efforts. And so we try to interact with fishers there. And then I guess the other thing I should mention, because it's pretty relevant, is I'm on the advisory council for the reef responsible program. But again, I'm more on their education and outreach. That's what I know more about than some of the direct work with fishers.

Speaker 2: So Speaker 2, would you say, in your opinion, that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on fisheries?

Speaker 2: Hmm. I think so. When you say fisheries, do you mean commercial fisheries? Or what do you mean by fisheries?

Speaker 2: I guess you could include commercial, but also if you think the recreational fishery sector is an important component of local communities, and the local economy, and socially and culturally. That would also be all part of this question. So yeah. Both, I guess.

Speaker 2: Okay, got it. Got it. Yes. Then I would say yes. I think that it's very much a part of the cultural identity, is just having fish as a ... Well, having fish and fisheries as a food source, really. A lot of the real traditional foods are fisheries or a conch or those sorts of things. I was just talking, I actually work with two guys that are ... I don't think they're officially commercial fishermen, but they grew up fishing, and they said that's how they survived. You know, they didn't have money, they didn't eat meat, or red meat so much. But they survived off of it. And that's just part of ... They actually had, we're having an interesting conversation, we're talking about whether or not we like lobster. And they're like, "We don't even think about whether we like it or not. It's just what you eat, you know?"

Speaker 2: Yeah. And so it's interesting. So when you asked if I meant commercially, is it because you ... Would you have a different answer if I had had said, "Yes, commercially" in terms of dependency or economically?

Speaker 2: Yeah. I'm not sure, actually.

Speaker 2: Okay. No, that's fine. I'm just curious.

Speaker 2: It would've been a little bit ... It's a little bit less easy to answer, because I know officially, anyways, that there's a limited amount of commercial fishermen that are active. But there's a whole lot of kind of subsistence fishing that happens. And probably a lot of unofficial commercial fishing that happens, or people without license sell. But there's a lot of people consuming fisheries products, whether they got it themselves, or from their friends, or through commercial fishing.

Speaker 2: Right. And so it's interesting that you mentioned a number of fishermen who may not be active, because my next question is, would you say that USVI fishermen are highly dependent on fisheries for their likelihoods, in your opinion?

Speaker 2: I think so, yeah. Some of them ... And I think that most of them would like to be. Whether or not they're able to be completely dependent on it is ... Not everybody has been, but yeah, I would say so.

Speaker 2: Okay. And in your opinion, would you say that USVI coastal communities are highly dependent on coral reefs?

Speaker 2: Yes, I would. Sure. So, I mean, certainly the fisheries benefit, because a lot of the popular fish species that people eat here are reef fish, for better or worse. And then of course, so that's sort of the direct connection to that. But then there's also just the services that coral reefs provide, both in supporting the other ecosystems. So a juvenile fish habitat, and that kind of stuff. But they also ... And I don't know if this is what you're asking as well, but they protect our shorelines from a lot of the wave action and storms. And they're also very much a source of entertainment for snorkeling and diving, and things like that.

Speaker 1: Great. Okay. So I am just going to ask you a couple of more questions, Speaker 2. So I'll take the lead on the next few. So what would you say is or are the major problems that are facing fisheries in the USVI?

Speaker 2: Oh, yeah. I mean, climate change I think is always going to be the big one, because it's so huge and kind of all-encompassing. And I think there's probably some smaller problem, I guess, that are maybe made worse or maybe even made unfixable by climate change. So some of the things that happen to coral, as the diseases happen, or the bleaching events happen, or natural things like storms happen, they become less resilient and less able to recover from those because of all of the issues around climate change. So yeah, that's the biggest one. But there's also the fisheries management. And I say this from someone who is not an expert on it. I kind of know what I know and I listen to people and try to learn about it, but I'm certainly not an expert. But I know that some of the management and some of the catch limits and so on have sometimes been based on data that isn't local. Some of the things like who gets to fish and who doesn't are based on laws that haven't been examined in quite a long time. And so those are management issues, I guess.

Speaker 1: Good. Okay. And what would you say are the most significant changes that have occurred in the US VI fisheries in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: The thing that I've seen that's been the most obvious is just really the degradation of habitat overall. I mean, the coral reefs are really obvious. They're not healthy and they're in really bad shape and all of the things around them are in bad shape as well. So less coral, then less fish, and so on. I've been in the VI for almost 20 years and I've seen a very dramatic difference in that. I've seen things like the conch. You have to go much deeper just to see them. There's just less of them.I guess overall habitat degradation is really the most noticeable thing.

Speaker 1: Okay. And I think my next question, it may overlap a little bit with some of the things you said, but you may have other things to say, because my next question is what would you say are the most significant environmental changes that have occurred in the US VI in the last couple of decades?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Yeah.

Speaker 1: So I think the less conch probably right falls under that, right?

Speaker 2: Yeah. Very much so kind of the same things. More habitat loss again. But also, more impact from the land as well. There's just more people, although I guess our census is telling us otherwise now. But there's more construction along the shorelines that in all the ways is kind of furthering that habitat degradation, pollution flowing into the waters, and it just seems like there's more and more pressure on the resources.

Speaker 1: Okay. So I know that you also mentioned some of these, but have you observed any changes in the US VI fisheries and/or environment that you think can be attributed to changes in the local climate?

Speaker 2: Yeah. I mean, kind of like I said before, there was pressure already and I think climate has kind of increased the pressure on a lot of things. So sometimes it's hard to parse out exactly what is directly related to climate change. But again, the coral. I'm just seeing a huge difference in coral health and they just can't seem to bounce back from all the other things that are happening because of that. And there's been more frequent bleaching events because of the high temperatures. I don't know how this affects fisheries actually, but it certainly affects the environment, I imagine it does, but we're seeing a lot more of the sargassum, the seaweed blooms. And those are, I believe, climate related directly.

Speaker 1: Okay. And in your opinion, are us VI fishers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I think they are. I mean, even if they're not saying directly climate change, they're certainly concerned about the changes that they're seeing because everything I see has got to be magnified to them because I don't get out in the water that much and I don't rely on it for a paycheck. But I don't know if everyone is necessarily making that connection, that those changes are climate related or if they're just things that have changed.

Speaker 1: Okay. And in your opinion are US VI fishery managers and researchers and decision makers concerned about climate change?

Speaker 2: I believe so. I think that they're having a hard time ... Things change slowly here and I think that there's some management structures that it's hard to change how you're looking at things. And so I do think they're concerned. I just don't know how much it's actually affecting their decision making yet.

Speaker 2: So Speaker 2, I have a couple of questions that have to do with relationships within the community. And these are specifically about the fishers and so of course, if this is something that you don't feel like you could answer, that's perfectly fine. But you may have enough experience or have things that you've

heard and people that you know, so I'll ask them anyway. So how would you describe the relationship between fishers in the US VI, so amongst themselves?

Speaker 2: Amongst themselves? Yeah. I don't know the ins and outs, but I think probably like any kind of business, there's some people who get along fine and some who don't and there's always some that kind of maybe don't have as positive practices as others and kind of people don't like as much. But as far as I know, I don't think it's that different than any other kind of business where there's some competition, but then there's also colleagues.

Speaker 2: Can you think of any examples of the fishers getting together to address

Speaker 2: Not much beyond... I mean, I know there's the fisheries councils, and that's the extent that I know about. Yeah, that's about all I know about.

Speaker 2: Okay. And do fishers in the communities where you work, and live, do they get together socially, or are there any sort of events, or important dates, or places where it you see fishermen congregate, or things like that?

Speaker 2: I don't know. I mean, certainly, the docks as they're launching their boat and stuff. I mean, I know it seems obvious, but some of them... So I live in Frederiksted on the west end. And the dock is right near a market that is not really used as a market, it's kind of a hangout spot. But beyond that, I don't know of any central area that they would hang out.

Speaker 2: Okay. And how would you describe the relationship between fishers and fishery managers in the USVI? And you can make a distinction between the local and the federal government, if you would like.

Speaker 2: Sure. Well locally, which is what I know more about, I think it differs a lot by island, interestingly. There's, certainly, a group in St. Thomas that is very unhappy with the local fisheries managers. I mean, just very vocally and, in my opinion, unreasonably. And I think it's just kind of a politics thing. There was somebody else that they wanted in that position. And so, they've gone out of their way to kind of to continue to have that relationship not be positive. In St. Croix, I think it's better. I think that the director of their fisheries here... Or fish and wildlife is on St. Croix. And so, it's easier for her to kind of see how things are going. The fishery staff locally has been very much understaffed, so they haven't had enough people to do the things that they're supposed to do which, of course, makes the fishers unhappy. But I don't know who to blame for that or who is perceived to be the person to blame for that. And I don't know much about the federal regulators, and our management folks, and their relationship with the fishers.

Speaker 2: Okay. And can you think of any examples of fishers and fishery managers getting together to address an issue?

Speaker 2: Well, of course, the council meetings that they have. I believe there have been other meetings beyond that to potentially address specific issues if they come up, getting public input on. So, they're about to change... Or add a recreational fisheries license here, which we haven't had. And so, I believe that there were meetings about that. In fact, next week, in two weeks or so, there's a public meeting, or listening session that's actually being hosted by a different nonprofit that isn't necessarily deeply involved in fisheries, but is working with the local government. And they're going to be talking about the Frederiksted Fish Market, and kind of how it's used which, obviously, relates to fisheries as well. Thinking back actually, and you were asking about if there are places where fishers meet and gather. This isn't exactly an answer, but when they do their registration, their annual registration for commercial fishers, they do that in-person. And that happens at the DPNR offices. And so, that's something where it's not quite a social gathering place, obviously, but that is one place where a lot of them will come within a short amount of time.

Speaker 1: So do you feel that fishery management in the USVI is fair in the decisions they make?

Speaker 2: Ooh, that's an interesting question. I don't know. I don't know enough about the decision making and how it comes about. I think that they definitely try to be, at least recently, but I don't know that it always ends up being that way and I don't know... Yeah, I'm not sure if I know enough to answer that.

Speaker 1: Okay. And that applies to both local and federal, do you feel you don't know enough to really answer either?

Speaker 2: Yeah.

Speaker 1: Okay. And do you think most fishers in the USVI understand how fishery managers make decisions?

Speaker 2: I don't think so. I think some of them do, particularly the one that are involved in the Fisheries Management Council. But I would say the majority of them probably only have a vague idea, but not much beyond that. Well, I think there's a lot more to the management decisions than most people realize. If done correctly, there's a fair amount of data collection, and science, and fisheries theory that goes in into it. And it is a science, and so it's not necessarily something that everyone has a full knowledge of, yeah.

Speaker 1: All right. And then, my last question is if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers, and between fishers and fishery managers? Well, so I guess first we could say, if they exist, how are conflicts between fishers and other fishers resolved, if you know of those conflicts?

Speaker 2: I don't know. I mean, probably depends on what the conflict is sometimes. I do know that sometimes the authorities can be called if it's something that's rises to legal issue beyond that. Maybe it just regular human interaction.

Speaker 1: And are you aware of any conflicts between fishers and fisher managers?

Speaker 2: I don't know if they're always resolved, so oftentimes fishers, and this is pretty common for the VI, will go to who they know that has some political sway or some power, whether it's the appropriate person or not. So it's not directly handled necessarily. And I think that if a fisher has an issue or a perceived issue with the managers, if it's the other way, so if managers have a conflict with fishers or an issue, I don't know. I don't know how they handle it.

Speaker 2: These are all our questions, Speaker 2. Is there anything that we didn't talk about or anything that you would like to add or any questions for us?

Speaker 2: The only thing that I can think of really is just that I know you said you're interviewing across the islands, but I do think that there seems to be a difference in a lot of those issues, particularly when you talk about interactions with fishers and fisher managers and differences by island. And that's some of its cultural differences between islands, some of it's based on who the managers are, some of it's based on what people are fishing and how going to shape those things are. So if there's higher pressure on a particularly favorite fish, then it becomes a little bit more desperate. And so there's probably more conflict. I think just consider that there may be differences in those answers between the islands.