

## **GCFI is 60 Years Old! Who Cares?**

MEL GOODWIN

*GCFI Treasurer, P.O. Box 21655, Charleston, South Carolina 29413 USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

GCFI has existed and grown for sixty years only because it is useful. Simply stated, GCFI provides an unbiased forum for the rapid exchange of ideas, perspectives, and information. In practice, the themes and focal points of GCFI meetings often reflect (and occasionally foreshadow) issues of major importance to fisheries and other marine resources of the Gulf and Caribbean region. Sixty years ago, GCFI meetings were populated largely by members of the seafood industry, academia, and government agencies. In recent years, the Institute's constituency has expanded dramatically. Today, it is clear that the marine resources of the Gulf and Caribbean are facing unprecedented challenges that can radically alter the lives of people throughout the region and beyond. GCFI is uniquely suited to play a vital role in meeting such challenges. Some of these opportunities are briefly discussed.

KEY WORDS : GCFI, history, program

### **¡GCFI tiene 60 años! ¿Quién cuida?**

GCFI ha existido y ha crecido por sesenta años solamente porque es útil. Indicado simplemente, GCFI proporciona un foro imparcial para el intercambio rápido de ideas, de perspectivas, y de la información. En la práctica, los temas y los puntos focales de las reuniones de GCFI reflejan a menudo (y presagie de vez en cuando) aplicaciones la importancia importante a las pesquerías y otros recursos marinos del golfo y de la región del Caribe. Hace sesenta años, las reuniones de GCFI fueron pobladas en gran parte por los miembros de la industria de los mariscos, de la academia, y de las agencias de estatal. En años recientes, las audiencias del instituto se ha ampliado dramáticamente. Hoy, está claro que los recursos marinos del golfo y del Caribe están haciendo frente a los desafíos sin precedentes que pueden alterar radicalmente las vidas de la gente a través de la región y más allá. GCFI se satisface únicamente para desempeñar un papel vital en resolver tales desafíos. Algunas de estas oportunidades se discuten brevemente.

PALABRAS CLAVES : GCFI, historia, programa

The first Gulf and Caribbean Fisheries Institute was held in Miami in August of 1948. The core purpose of this meeting was to bring scientists and commercial fishermen together to exchange information and ideas. The prime mover behind this first institute was F. G. Walton Smith who had founded the Marine Laboratory at the University of Miami (forerunner of the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science) in 1943.

Walton Smith felt that most fishery scientists in the Gulf region lived in ivory towers and never communicated with the fishing industry. This idea of bringing together groups of people who ordinarily do not interact continued to be one of the defining features of GCFI for the past 60 years. We don't have a definitive statement of exactly why Walton Smith thought it was important for scientists to talk to fishermen. But it seems clear he believed that these discussions could be the catalyst for important initiatives.

This idea formed the central character of GCFI, which has persisted for the last sixty years:

*An Unbiased Forum for Exchanging Information  
Important to Marine Resources of the Gulf and  
Caribbean Region*

The first GCFI included 27 presentations over a period of six days. The subject matter of these presentations covered five themes:

- i) Commercial Fisheries - 9 presentations
- ii) Caribbean (non-U.S.) Fisheries - 7 presentations
- iii) Conservation & Management - 5 presentation
- iv) Recreational Fishing - 2 presentations
- v) Biology & Ecology - 4 presentations

Six days and only 27 presentations; what were they doing? Apparently, they participated in a variety of field trips, social events, and other meetings that provided opportunities to exchange information and ideas.

Walton Smith also believed in the importance of a regional perspective, and his policy was that every third GCFI meeting should be held somewhere in the Caribbean. This format was appealing enough to sustain GCFI for more than 30 years. Many people contributed during those years, but in addition to F. G. Walton Smith, two others deserve special mention: Claire Idyll, who was the Institute's first Executive Secretary, and became GCFI Chairman in 1959; and Jim Higman, who was Executive Secretary from 1960-1984, and in that capacity organized the annual meeting and produced the printed Proceedings almost single-handedly.

There are numerous examples of how GCFI themes and those informal catalytic conversations have led to new initiatives. A good example is the effort during the late 1970s to make GCFI more inclusive of small-scale fisheries. Which led to the Artisanal Fisheries Workshop at the 1982 Institute in Nassau, Bahamas. This program

included at-sea training and demonstrations, workshops on fish smoking, and working groups to identify key issues of concern to artisanal fisheries that would form the basis for future GCFI sessions. The 1982 Institute also included sessions on conch mariculture that summarized work that had been done to date, and helped chart the direction of further collaborative research and technology development.

These are two of the many examples of ways in which GCFI responds to current priorities and needs related to use and management of Caribbean marine resources. It's important for us to realize that "a forum for exchanging information" doesn't just mean more papers and formal meetings; information can be exchanged in many other ways as well. Many participants frequently comment on the value of informal discussions and *ad hoc* workshops that regularly spring up during a typical Institute.

We should also understand that change isn't always easy. Greater emphasis on small-scale Caribbean fisheries was a big change for GCFI, and it was a change that did not come easily for everyone. But even bigger changes were just around the corner.

In 1984, Alan Berman, dean of RSMAS, announced to the GCFI Board of Directors that the University of Miami would phase out its financial and logistical support to GCFI. If the Institute was to continue to exist, it would have to do so as an independent organization. This led to GCFI becoming a formally incorporated nonprofit corporation in 1985.

What lies ahead for GCFI? If history is a guide, the future will probably include some elements of GCFI's role as a forum for exchanging information, as well as responding to current issues and needs involving marine resources of the region. What are those issues and needs?

The keynote address in the opening session of the 59th GCFI offered a compelling and sobering answer. Dr. Jeremy Jackson identified six issues that not only affect Caribbean marine resources, but marine resources on a global scale:

- i) Over-exploitation of everything big,
- ii) Destruction of benthic habitats,
- iii) Globalization of species,
- iv) Ocean warming,
- v) Poisoning of food webs, and
- vi) Rise of slime and dead zones

Two months ago, Worldwatch Institute released a report titled *Oceans in Peril*, that emphasizes that all living marine systems are in jeopardy, including deep ocean systems such as seamounts and hydrothermal vents. These systems are very poorly explored, but there is already evidence of significant degradation from human activity.

So, What Can We DO? Jeremy Jackson says that we need to:

- i) Open our eyes to the magnitude of change that has happened and is continuing to happen;

- ii) Focus attention on useful questions;
- iii) Develop testable management and conservation strategies in the light of historical perspective; and
- iv) Test these strategies in specific, socially important contexts at ecologically realistic spatial and temporal scales

Does this mean we need to do years of study before any action can occur? Definitely not. The Worldwatch Institute report emphasizes that lack of data should be seen as supporting precautionary approaches, rather than as an excuse for inaction or action that is likely to cause further damage. According to the report, we need to revise our concept of "freedom OF the seas" (i.e., freedom to do whatever we choose with ocean resources) to "freedom FOR the seas" to recover from degradation and overexploitation, with particular attention to establishing a global network of marine protected areas as well as protection at the level of whole ecosystems. These recommendations may not be the best ideas; but the issues are real, and may be the most serious issues yet to confront Caribbean marine resources.

What does all this mean for GCFI? Jeremy Jackson also says that

*"There is little public or general scientific awareness of the scale of the changes that have occurred or their implications for the future."*

And this presents an opportunity for GCFI.

GCFI began as an effort to foster catalytic conversations between scientists who study Caribbean marine resources and people who use these resources. In 1948, resource users were seen as commercial fishers from the U.S. Today, it is time to foster new catalytic conversations. GCFI is uniquely well-suited to making science understandable to non-scientists, educators, policy makers, and non-specialist stakeholders. Several times in the past, GCFI has flirted briefly with the idea of being involved with education. I want to suggest that we re-open that conversation. More than ever before, the future of Caribbean marine resources depends very much upon public understanding of those resources and how they are affected by human activities as well as natural processes.

Who cares? Well, more than just a few scientists. By most recent estimates there are about 30 million small-scale fishermen in developing countries. And this is but a small fraction of the people who depend upon marine resources for their livelihood and their lives. I can think of no future for GCFI that is more worthwhile than if in 20 years the children of the Caribbean know GCFI as an organization that made their lives better. Making that kind of difference is our challenge and our opportunity.

Happy birthday, GCFI!