

A Fisherman's Dilemma and Fisheries Management

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ABSTRACT

As a fisher you are most interested in catching plenty fish and making more money each trip. But suddenly realization hits you. You are not catching as much fish as before. You are not making enough money. Why? Fisheries management information is not reaching fishers as it should, and what little they get they do not pay any attention to. This is cause for concern and there is no simple solution. Fishermen and fisheries managers often work in different worlds and do not communicate as they should. This causes mistrust and disrespect for the knowledge of both sides. What is needed is more collaboration between fisheries science, management, and resource users to emphasize sharing information and discoveries. This paper describes some of the problems encountered in this area, and possible solutions for consideration.

KEY WORDS: Barbados, fisherman, management

INTRODUCTION

Barbados is the most easterly of all the east Caribbean states. It is located along the 13° 02' N latitude and 59° 30' W longitude. The island is 166 square miles with a population of over 260,000. Our major industry is tourism, followed by sugar, manufacturing and the fishing industry. Our national dish is flyingfish and cou-cou.

I started fishing when I was 11 years old, still at school, but going fishing on weekends to accumulate lunch money for the next week. My parents were very poor. My father was a fisherman and my mother a general worker in the Ministry of Communication and Works at the time. So it was not difficult for me to choose fishing as a profession after the death of my mother at a very tender age, for I am one of those single parent children. The only time I ever have regrets is when the elements are against me. And that is when the winds are high, the seas are rough and the fish not biting. Fishing is not only my profession, it is also a hobby to me. That is why I can appreciate people leaving the office work behind and going fishing on weekends for relaxation.

BARBADOS FISHING INDUSTRY

Our fishing industry is relatively a large one, consisting mainly of four groups of fishers. That is the reef fisher, day boat fisher, iceboat fisher and longline fisher.

The reef fisher targets the reef fish by way of fish pots (traps), hand casting, or to a lesser extent, spear fishing. The day boat fisher targets the flyingfish, dolphin (mahi mahi) king fish, (wahoo) tunas and many other large pelagics. The boats are around 20-32 feet. With a crew of two they leave early in the morning, returning late that same day. There are approximately 289 day boats.

The ice boat fisher targets the same species as the day boat fisher, but with the availability of ice can remain at sea much longer (as long as ten to twelve day duration). There are approximately 147 ice boats carrying a crew of three.

The longline fisher targets the yellow fin tuna, blue marlin and black marlin, swordfish, and many other large pelagics. With a crew of four the boat range in sizes of 40 to 85 ft long and stay at sea for a period of ten to thirty days. There are approximately 30 longline vessels.

Having given a background of who we are, where we are and what we do, it is time to highlight the hardship we often face.

THE FISHERMAN'S DILEMMA --- UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Just recently, our reef fish have been dying at an alarming rate, not only in Barbados, but in the neighbouring islands of Grenada, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Tobago. It is estimated that about 75 thousand pounds of dead fish were disposed of by the National Conservation Commission in Barbados. That figure has nothing to do with what was swept away by the currents and what remains on the seabed. International assistance was sought and preliminary indications are that the cause in Barbados was a *Streptococcus* bacterium which was found to have killed fish in other parts of the world including the USA, Israel, Canada, Japan, and Australia. Though not conclusive, I am glad that fishermen are not in any way implicated in the fish kill.

In Barbados a white-spined sea urchin (*Tripneustes ventricosus*) locally called "sea egg" was, and maybe still is, a delicacy. Over the years the sea eggs began to gradually disappear. The Government upon advice imposed a moratorium in an effort to save the sea egg industry. At the same time, the black sea egg (*Diadema antillarum*) though not harvested, disappeared. All kind of theories were advanced for the disappearance of the black sea egg (a pathogenic microbe was found to be the cause), but the fishermen were blamed for the low yields of the white sea egg. Indiscriminate harvesting out of season before the sea eggs were mature enough to reproduce, and breaking sea eggs and throwing

them back on the seabed were thought to be contributing factors. Although I will concede that these can be contributory factors, no one has been able to convince me that these were the primary factors. With the recent fish kills taking place all over the world which have scientists baffled, I am more convinced that something similar happened to the white sea egg as to the black.

FISHERS, FISHERIES MANAGERS AND SCIENTISTS

Over the years, our government, through the Fisheries Division, has embarked on programmes to save the reef fish, such as to make it illegal to fish on certain parts of the west coast, much to the displeasure of the fishermen on the west coast. There is a move to make it illegal to use 1.25 inch mesh size wire. Instead the 1.50 inch is preferred, with the use of bio-degradable wire as a trap door to prevent of ghost fishing, so allowing the fish to escape therefore reaching a more mature size. This is promoted through education that responsible fishing today guarantees you brighter tomorrow. Having seen and read about the amount of fish that died in the fish kill, I am wondering where were the reef fish fisherman fishing or are the methods employed not effective. I think, in light of what has transpired, that there should be some sort of moratorium imposed, and fishermen should be given assistance to construct artificial reefs.

We in the Caribbean often talk about a common market (CARICOM). Over the years, all kinds of treaties have been signed. It boggles the mind how all CARICOM states can sign a free trade pact, and two countries cannot work out a fishing agreement. Barbados and Trinidad and Tobago over the years have not been able to sign any major fishing agreement after the initial signing of the first agreement which our fisherman found not favourable. I am yet to see a treaty where our fishermen have benefited.

Sometimes, our fishermen take matters into their own hands, venture into Trinidad and Tobago territorial waters, are caught, arrested, jailed, fined, and their catch confiscated. It is easier for foreign vessels to be re-flagged in Trinidad and Tobago than for us to reach a fishing agreement. Under the free trade treaty, the by-catch from those foreign vessels reaches Barbados as CARICOM originated goods. This is wrong, and there must be ways to deal with circumstances such as these.

Over the years I have read and heard a lot of declining fish stocks, and as usual fishermen has been blamed for overfishing. I think that government, scientists and fishermen alike all have to take their share of the blame. Scientists all over the world invent or develop means for us to enhance our fishing by way of satellites, GPS, depth sounders, sonar, water temperature gauges, direction finders, fish finders, the latest in gear technology and literature. Governments have provided the incentives, the support and sometimes the

finance. Yet, without them shouldering any of the blame, we fishermen are accused of overfishing. Try telling this to a Barbadian flyingfish fisherman.

The past two years have been the most successful years in our flyingfish history. I am not here to knock scientists or anyone else. All of us are to blame. Sometimes I wonder if we are not too quick to start finger pointing when we are mystified or do not have concrete evidence.

The point I am making is that so long as we have a problem and we accept that there is a problem, let us work together to correct it and address the cause. Over the years, fishermen and scientists have always been at loggerheads as to where the bluefin tuna feeds. The scientists claim it feeds at the surface, and the fishermen claim at the bottom. According to National Fisherman, the February 1997 edition, the fishermen appear to be right. I think the time has come for fishermen and scientists to work harder and closer than ever before. In that way, they will have more respect for one another assessments, and that way the fishing industry will be the benefactor.

Fishermen work hard and long hours exposing themselves to constant danger without even getting the recognition they deserve. I cannot and will not attempt to speak for fishermen world-wide, but what I can do is talk about fishermen in my country. In Barbados, a fisherman is seen as nobody because of the stigma attached to the profession. In former years, fishermen were not well educated, some never had the opportunity for an education, and some never saw it as paramount. What they were interested in was providing food and shelter for their families. Today things have changed, and in order to be successful you must be educated and competitive, no matter what aspect of life from which you come.

Fishing is not an easy task. Sometimes you wonder what ever made you choose it as a profession. You are constantly away from your family. Sometimes you face the most adverse conditions, rough weather, stormy weather, water too cold, fish not biting, not getting enough money for your fish because of market conditions over which you have no control. Just recently last month, I experienced stormy conditions, caught at sea with a broken down vessel during the passage of hurricane Jose. Believe me, it was not a pleasant experience. In Barbados because of the recent fish kill, all fisherfolk are feeling the economic squeeze. Yet when things pick up, as a responsible fisher you still have to be conservative and think about sustainability. It makes all the common sense in the world but, but it does not make economic sense at this time.

There is a campaign in the United States to try to stop fishers from catching small fish, especially the swordfish. The authorities are asking the public not to purchase fish under a certain size. I know what they are trying to do, and that is to preserve the swordfish, making sure there is no market for the small ones, therefore discouraging fishers from taking them. It makes all the sense in the

world to throw that fish back in the water if it is alive and hope that it lives, matures and reproduces. But tell me what good will it do if that fish is dead when it is taken from the gear? Should I throw it back and feed other fish, or should I bring it ashore and sell it at a fraction of the cost and help to feed some poor families. Either way, that fish is lost forever. I urge decision-makers not to only think about the developed countries but also the lesser developed ones. Remember that if it is bad in the developed countries, it is worse in the lesser developed, and what might have minor implications may have adverse consequences in the lesser developed. The gap between the affluent and the poor has not lessened. I think we should look at alternatives.

SOME SOLUTIONS

The only way we can overcome these problems is through ongoing education programmes. Having gone to Belize and participated in the First CARICOM Fisherfolk Strengthening Workshop for regional fishermen from 12-23 July, 1998, on reflection I can honestly say it has changed the way I think and fish. I know now that there is more to fishing than financial gain. I urge decision-makers to continue to support all ongoing education programmes so that fishers worldwide will realise that responsible fishing today guarantees a brighter tomorrow.