

Managing the Managers – Changing the Emphasis of Fisheries Management

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ABSTRACT

Many Caribbean countries are faced with the challenge of managing complex fisheries against the backdrop of seemingly inadequate human and financial resources. This has often led to frustrated resource managers and ineffective management. Perhaps we need to review our approach to fisheries management in the region and adopt an approach which can allow us to be more effective, in spite of our human resource and financial constraints. It is being suggested:

- i) That it is important to build a strong team (team building should start with the local fisheries division and branch out to encompass the fishermen, other resource users, and the regional team players);
- ii) Pay more attention to improving synergy among resource managers (this has the potential to significantly improve effectiveness);
- iii) Fully utilise local knowledge of the resource;
- iv) Change the structure of the fisheries division to reflect the social importance of the fishing industry,
- v) Tailor make fisheries training to the needs of the local fisheries division, build in flexibility to allow for responsiveness to change;
- vi) Utilize simple yet effective tools such as public awareness campaigns).

It has been said that we manage people, not fish. Perhaps if we place the spotlight on the human factor, we may discover that we have the tools, which we need after all.

KEY WORDS: Human resource management, team building, public awareness

BACKGROUND

During November of 1998, the Government of the British Virgin Islands recruited a Fisheries Officer from Barbados. Armed with basic academic qualifications in Biology and Natural Resource Management, this Officer felt ready for the challenge, excitement and opportunity of working in a discipline that had for a long time held her interest. However, she was soon to realize that her task was going to be more challenging than expected.

The Officer found herself with responsibility for one of the five Units within the Government Department tasked with management of the Territory's natural resources (including fisheries resources). The role of the Unit encompassed all the

roles/functions normally associated with fisheries management. This included marine research, fisheries extension, maintenance of fisheries infrastructure, development of policy and legislation, surveillance, and enforcement.

The Unit had attempted to address all of the above functions in the past with varying degrees of success. Previous fisheries officers had attempted to focus on a few of these areas (namely data collection and research), but few programs had been sustained as a result of these initial attempts. Each of the major functions of the Fisheries Unit has the potential to be a specialist area in itself. However, while it may be argued that the Fisheries Unit had been able to make some progress over the years, progress was slow, sometimes difficult to identify, and seemingly characterized by slow changes around a mean. In Caribbean language, it was often a matter of "one step forward, two steps backward". Several of the programs had never achieved any momentum and the work of the Unit was characterized by an *ad hoc* approach to accomplishing poorly defined goals and objectives. The performance of the Unit tended to be mediocre. This state of affairs had become accepted as "the way things were" and perhaps had to be, and individuals within the Unit had long given up striving for excellence.

However, it soon became clear that fisheries management in the British Virgin Islands (BVI) was reaching a turning point. There were signals in the general climate of the country that it was time for change. The Territory was approaching crossroads and was coming to the recognition that it would need to change its way of doing things if it was to remain competitive in international markets. This recognition resulted in the Public Sector Development Program (PSDP), an ambitious program aimed at creating significant change in the way the public sector of the BVI did business. Prior to the PSDP, a lot of work had also gone into creating the National Integrated Development Strategy (NIDS). In the process of developing the strategy, a lot of thought had been put into analyzing the status of the major economic sectors of the environment and in determining the path that should be taken to developing these sectors. The fisheries sector fell under the purview of the productive sectors as well as under environment. Both of the above mentioned programs (PSDP and NIDS) included extensive consultation with persons at several levels within the public service, as well as with members of the public. The Fisheries Management Plan for the BVI had been developed as part of an initiative of the Natural Resource Management Unit of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (this plan was completed in 1998), a comprehensive piece of modern fisheries legislation had been passed (the 1997 Virgin Islands Fisheries Act). Politicians had gotten wind of the fact that fisheries was a sector with potential to make a more significant contribution to the economy than is occurring at present, and as a result fisheries had become a key topic for discussion on the political agendas. All of this meant that the time was right for fisheries managers who were struggling for years, to finally have the opportunity to make a difference.

While all of the above was occurring at the policy level, the fisheries resources of the BVI were facing new threats, or in some cases, old threats were becoming more serious. With the BVI going into a phase of rapid development, fisheries

resources were coming under increasing pressure from developmental activities such as land reclamation, dredging, and destruction of habitat for use as marinas. There was increasing concern about the status of nearshore reef resources, which were thought to be showing signs of overfishing. In addition, the Government of the BVI was being increasingly faced with an urgent need to find mechanisms to address the high levels of illegal fishing in its waters.

With the increasing expectations of the fisheries sector, the anticipation of what would be needed to address the changes which were about to occur in the public sector, and the reality that if the fisheries resources weren't adequately managed they would be lost, it was clearly time to reorganize the Fisheries Unit or face the possibility of the Unit becoming totally ineffective. However, before setting out to solve problems and create change, it was necessary to first clearly define the problems and constraints to effective fisheries management in the BVI. This paper identifies the challenges (problems/constraints) being faced by the Fisheries Unit, it discusses some of the approaches that have been taken to create change, it summarizes the lessons learned, and it attempts to apply these lessons to other aspects of the work of the Unit.

CHARACTERISATION OF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT IN THE BRITISH VIRGIN ISLANDS

Formal fisheries management in the British Virgin Islands is less than twenty-five years old. As in other Caribbean countries, the functions of fisheries management were initially tied to those of agricultural development. However, in the last decade, fisheries management has been conducted through the Conservation and Fisheries Department, a Department with a wide range of responsibilities that run the gamut of environmental management. As a result, fisheries management is a new and poorly understood discipline in the British Virgin Islands. This lack of understanding of the complexity of fisheries management issues is sometimes reflected in the quality of decisions that are made with regard to resource allocation, natural resource management, and human resource development. The challenge is to educate. In order to be effective, different approaches to building awareness and understanding of fisheries issues would be needed for different target groups. The policy makers and the resource managers are among the key groups that need to be targeted.

Another constraint faced by the BVI is the heavy reliance on the external labour force. In the short history of formal fisheries management in the BVI, there have been at least five Fisheries Officers. Several of these Officers have not stayed with the Department for more than two to four years (two years being the average length of a Government contract). This has resulted in a lack of continuity. It has also meant that the direction and focus of the Fisheries Unit also changed as Officers changed. To date, the BVI has been unable to produce a truly local Fisheries Officer, and this continues to be of concern to the Conservation and Fisheries Department. Another problem created by this high turnover is that there is the

possibility for key posts to remain open for a long period of time, as occurred prior to 1998. This causes the Fisheries Unit to lose momentum, and may also have a negative impact on program development. Related to the above problem is the recognition that not enough persons are recruited into or staying in the field of fisheries management. An alternative way of looking at this is that the right type of person is not being recruited.

To add to these difficulties, the staff of the Fisheries Unit is inadequately trained and inexperienced in fisheries management. This places serious limitations on the most enthusiastic and energetic of staff, and often leads to frustration as a result of the perceived inability of individuals to create change.

Another challenge to fisheries management in the BVI results from its geography. Several islands make up the Territory, and each is unique with respect to its fisheries. Resources differ from island to island, social as well as economic aspects differ, and as a result the management needs of each island may differ. The BVI has four major population centers (Tortola, Virgin Gorda, Anegada and Jost Van Dyke), and the situation on each island may demand a special approach to management. The other problem that results from this is working out the logistics of getting to the 'outer' islands often enough to make a difference (the Conservation and Fisheries Department is physically located on Tortola).

Within the Fisheries Unit and amongst the fishermen, there is a perception that policy makers are not genuinely committed to sustainably managing the fisheries, and that this has been limiting the development of the fisheries.

While the Government may have a key role to play in guiding fisheries management, it has been recognised that this cannot be done without the cooperation of the fishermen. While the Fisheries Management Plan and the Fisheries Act of the BVI encourage fisher participation, the mechanisms are not in place to foster this type of participation.

CHALLENGES TO BE FACED AS THE BVI MOVED TOWARDS EXCELLENCE IN FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Given what has been stated above, there are several things that the Fisheries Unit of the BVI must master as it moves towards playing a more significant role in the management of the fisheries resources of the Territory. These can be briefly summarised as follows:

- i) Make the most efficient use of current resources, while making preparations for the acquisition of the resources needed.
- ii) Develop and build an appropriate foundation/framework that would facilitate the current and future work of the Department.
- iii) Develop an approach to fisheries management in the BVI which is sustainable – fisheries management in the BVI cannot rely on hard to acquire skills.
- iv) Find ways of utilising the strengths of the persons within the Fisheries Unit while building on the weaknesses (see the strengths more than the

- weaknesses).
- v) Develop a way of tailor making training of staff to the needs of the Department. Training should be relatively low in cost, easy to obtain, easy to achieve over a short time span or short blocks of time and should make an immediate difference in the ability of the Territory to manage its resources.
 - vi) Develop commitment and dedication to the tasks at hand and loyalty to the organisation.
 - vii) Build a learning organisation. Such an organisation would allow persons to learn from their mistakes, and encourage them to take the risks that may be necessary in the quest for success.
 - viii) Challenge the traditional approaches to fisheries management where they do not meet the needs of the Territory or where they are not appropriate in the context of the country.

LESSONS LEARNED

People generally resist change. Reasons for this differ and may include lack of understanding of the reason for change and the change process, fear that they may be displaced as a result of change, or discomfort with the uncertainty associated with periods of accelerated change. As perhaps should have been expected, there was a slowness in responding to the change in direction of the Fisheries Unit. However, after approximately two years there is an increasing willingness and ability to respond to change and an understanding of the need to move in a different direction. In the interim, a lot of lessons have been learned.

Lessons were learned about the process of change itself, and about change management. Creating major change is easier if persons are prepared beforehand for the change that is expected. The more people understand about where the organization wants to go, how it hopes to get there and where they fit in, the easier it becomes for them to adapt to the change. Several techniques make be used to assist in achieving this. The vision of the organization must be clear to all involved. It is sometimes better to paint a detailed picture rather than a vague sketch. Commitments much be obtained from persons for achieving small steps along the way (huge steps may appear a bit daunting at first). The concept of the psychological contract may be useful here, in such a contract there is a clear agreement between two persons about what is to be done and how. Feedback is used to clarify that both persons understand the agreement in the same way. People must be encouraged to think critically. Rather than providing an answer for every query, or a solution for every problem (or as Caribbean persons would say, a plaster for every sore), encourage persons to become actively involved in developing the solutions or ask them to think of why the solution you suggested might be a good one (can they think of any merits to the suggested approach?). A truly participatory approach usually results in more commitment to action. Patience is another virtue that must be learned. Persons may take a lot longer than you expect to respond to

change. However, it must be remembered that they may not have the same training, experiences or perspectives that you have (and which you may actually have gained over a long period of time without realising it). They therefore cannot be expected to respond in the way that you would. To some extent, people must be allowed to learn and change at their own rate. However, once the environment is one that fosters that change, it will probably occur.

Building a team also takes time and the elements of a successful team must be clearly understood. First, it must be acknowledged that a team can accomplish a lot more (and accomplish it much more easily) than individuals working alone. Also a team is much more than a group of individuals working towards the same goal. Team building is a process, and it depends on the interactions between the individual members of the group. Team members must develop an understanding and tolerance for each other; they must develop a set of shared values, including a shared commitment to work together to achieve their objectives. A successful team will also develop a strong team identity. The team leader, or facilitator (the person managing the managers), must find ways to identify the contribution that each person can bring to the team and encourage the other team players to recognise what these contributions are. A lot of effort must go into ensuring that each person understands their role, and is made to feel comfortable as they try to play that role.

Persons must be allowed to work in an environment where they can take the risks that may be necessary for them to grow as an individual, and for the organisation to move forward. Each member of the team must feel valued as an individual. While there should be attempts to meet the needs and aspirations of individuals, this should be done within the context of the team and not at the expense of it. Where there is the opportunity to recruit new members to the team, care should be taken not to select persons on the basis of academic qualifications alone; rather attitudinal competencies and ability to work as part of a team should be taken into account. Several tools may also be used to enhance the performance of the team. One human resource management tool that can be used successfully (if well understood), is the Performance Management Agreement (PMA). In the Fisheries Unit of the BVI, this tool has been used to give team players a very clear understanding as to what role they are expected to play on the team and within the overall development of the organisation. The PMA, when properly used, will set very clear standards, objectives, and guidelines. PMAs can be designed to reflect the conceptual picture of where the organization wants to go and how it wants to get there. While each PMA is separate, they should link together to form a whole (like pieces in a puzzle). An important aspect of the PMA that is being used by the Government of the BVI is that there is a section where persons can identify and commit to the actions that would be necessary to enhance the ability of the individual to perform and by extension improve the probability of the organisation achieving success. PMAs allow for a stepwise progression in a forward direction and can therefore act as a link between what occurs in the present and what is desired in the future. PMAs are dynamic and can be one means by which an organisation may achieve the flexibility to respond to new challenges. Used wisely, the PMA can be a method by which

persons can be encouraged to make use of their current skills while being challenged to improve.

Another tool is the development of effective linkages with other stakeholders who can assist in facilitating change, wherever these persons may be found. The Fisheries Unit has been able to benefit from relationships from key Departments and other organizations both within and outside the country. Further development of these relationships and development of relationship with other key individuals and organizations can greatly enhance the effectiveness of the Fisheries Unit at little additional cost.

CHANGING THE EMPHASIS

Given the changes in the approaches and performance of individuals within the Fisheries Unit that have occurred within the last two years, there is reason to believe that the team approach can be successfully used to improve the performance of the organization. It must be recognized that team building is a process whereby a group evolves into a team, i.e. a collection of persons with similar objectives moves towards a becoming a group of persons who work skillfully together to achieve these objectives. Some schools of thought state that there are three phases in the progression from group to team (Honey 1997). The first stage is the chaotic stage, perhaps the most discouraging stage. Individuals within the group have not learned to accomplish goals together as yet, nor have they defined the rules and procedures that characterize how the group works. In the second stage, the formal stage (the Fisheries Unit of the BVI is arguably at this stage now), the group begins to develop ways of working together, it formalizes its procedures, and defines the roles of its members. In this stage the role of the group leader is emphasized. In the third stage (if the group survives the first two) the group develops a synergy and the ability to work together well, each person's work enhancing that of the others. In this stage individuals are more confident of themselves and in the other team members; they have built an atmosphere of trust, openness and cooperation. During this phase the leader/facilitator of the group (now team) can participate more in the activities of the team rather than provide direction. It not essential for every member of the team to be involved in the successful completion of every task, and wisdom must be used in determining when the team approach can enhance the process and when it can act as a hindrance. For instance, the entire team may not have to be involved in routine daily tasks.

The team approach may solve the problem of making the maximum use of current resources, but this alone is not enough to solve the problems associated with fisheries management in the BVI. The most serious constraint to the effectiveness of the Fisheries Unit of the BVI is development of human resources. Traditionally throughout the Caribbean, Fisheries Divisions and Departments have placed an emphasis on the biological aspects of fisheries management, i.e. some Departments have focused on scientific data collection, stock assessment, and biological solutions to problems. At the moment, this approach is not practical for the BVI. Past

attempts at focusing on scientific projects and programs has meant that these programs have lasted only as long as there is a Fisheries Officer with that capability. It takes at least five years to develop a good scientist (and this is probably a conservative estimate), and then that scientist needs a lot of support services if they are to be effective. With the diverse fisheries resources present in the BVI, several scientists would be needed to make a meaningful impact.

It is therefore being suggested that the Fisheries Unit see its role as coordinating Fisheries Management and ensuring the effective and efficient management of the resource. Rather than expending limited resources trying to develop the capacity to do everything itself, the Department should focus more strongly on developing the linkages that could facilitate its work. For instance, the Unit could work closely with the local Community College, as well as with regional Universities (such as the University of the West Indies and the University of the Virgin Islands), to ensure that the necessary scientific research is done. The Unit should further ensure that the research done meets fisheries management needs.

Education is also a key element on which to focus. An aggressive public awareness campaign, tailor made to target the specific groups of persons (e.g. students, tourist, fishermen, policy makers etc.), has the potential to create more change than merely passing regulations that may be difficult to enforce. Many people in the community have expressed a willingness to change their behaviors, but they need more information and guidance to do so. Such a public awareness campaign should have specific objectives and should be based on the Fisheries Management Plan of the Territory.

More attention should be given to the socioeconomic aspects of the fisheries, especially since a fisheries management solution that is socially unacceptable is likely to fail. This shift in focus should be reflected in a change in the composition of the Fisheries Unit, and a social scientist (or a person from a similar discipline) should be a part of the Fisheries Team.

Having a person trained in understanding social behavior and perhaps community development on the team should enhance the ability of the Fisheries Unit to do extension work. Within the BVI, the need for, and importance of, involving fishermen and other stakeholders in the decision making process has been identified, accepted and written into law. The challenge will come in implementing these concepts and ideas. The Fisheries Unit will have to act as a catalyst for participatory fisheries management, as this type of thinking and decision making is relatively new to many fishers; a substantial amount of effort will be required to produce strong, durable, and effective fisher organizations. Appropriately trained professionals, along with knowledgeable stakeholders, such as fishermen, will ensure that useful information is harnessed so that it is available for use in fisheries management.

More attention should also be paid to developing easily available, low cost, fisheries specific training for fisheries personnel and other interested persons. This may not be difficult, as the H. Lavity Stoutt Community College within the BVI is already looking at the possibility of becoming a center of excellence in marine studies, and It may be appropriate for the College to incorporate fisheries

management into their curriculum planning.

Natural resource management, and by extension fisheries management, is a multi-disciplinary subject. Many universities offer fisheries management programs that provide students with exposure to fisheries biology, fisheries management, fisheries legislation and policy, and other relevant subjects. However, natural resource management is not wholly about managing natural resources; it includes managing the use of those resources so that they continue to be beneficial to mankind – natural resource management is about people. It is about how natural resources have in the past, or will in the present or future, impact people (and vice versa). It is important that decision-makers are attentive to the people. The discipline of fisheries management may benefit from the body of knowledge and experiences that already exist in other disciplines, such as human resource management and sociology. By successfully applying that body of knowledge and applying the energies of a cadre of enthusiastic, efficient, and effective natural resource managers, the Caribbean could gain the ability to more effectively manage its fisheries resources

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SUGGESTED READING

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