

## Thinking of stewardship in Caribbean small-scale fisheries

### Pensando en la rectoría en la pesca artesanal del Caribe

### Réflexion sur l'intendance dans la pêche artisanale des Caraïbes

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#### EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Recent projects in Caribbean small-scale fisheries (SSF) have either explicitly used the concept of stewardship in their design or have implicitly incorporated this notion in their activities. Yet, Caribbean fisheries authorities and fisherfolk organisations do not normally talk of stewardship as a goal to which they aspire. Some SSF stakeholders associate stewardship mainly with globalized eco-labelling, which evokes an image of threatening SSF marginalization in competitive seafood markets. To others, in contrast, stewardship encompasses favorable SSF collaborative instruments and initiatives such as promoted internationally by the SSF Guidelines. This potentially powerful, but sometimes abstract and misunderstood, concept is examined here through the lens of three of the author's own experiences of SSF stewardship in order to probe the different perspectives. It is important to think about what stewardship means to knowledge, attitudes and practices if SSF are to be sustainable in the Caribbean.

An often-used explanation of stewardship is that it is an action-oriented framework designed "to respond to and shape social-ecological systems under conditions of uncertainty and change" with a goal "to sustain the capacity [of ecosystems] to provide ecosystem services that support human well-being" (Chapin et al. 2010:242 adapted from Moraes et al. 2021). On deeper examination of the literature, the concept incorporates ethics, religion, norms, values, responsibility, power, care, etc. It can be nurturing as well as exploitative of nature and humanity. As a key concept, stewardship can embrace the entirety of a social-ecological system such as a small-scale fishery regardless of its spatial extent and diversity.

The approach used here to investigate stewardship can be described as a light application of the case study method (Yin 2009). Three cases of stewardship were drawn from the author's own experience. They were interrogated by first examining the ways in which the concept was operationalized. Next, the case considered how stewardship was perceived by stakeholders especially for the impact on SSF. The three cases selected were (1) the Stakeholder Council (Public Chamber) of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), (2) a Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) international working group, and (3) the sub-regional StewardFish project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO).

The MSC is an international non-profit organization. It recognizes and rewards efforts to protect oceans and safeguard seafood supplies for the future via eco-labelling. From 2014 to 2016 the author was a member of the Stakeholder Council (Public Chamber) of the MSC which has since been restructured. The role was as an applied academic with interest in developing world SSF. During this period the only MSC certified fishery in the Caribbean Community was the Atlantic seabob fishery of Suriname. The similar fishery in Guyana and the Bahamas spiny lobster fishery were considered as possible future candidates. The regular MSC certification process employed a primarily quantitative, natural science-based indicator system with little of the social science content relevant to SSF. A simplified risk-based method applicable to SSF was also available but considered second-rate. The MSC has been criticized for having an approach to stewardship that is inappropriate to developing country SSF (Stratoudakis et al. 2016). However, the MSC also partners to establish Fishery Improvement Programmes (FIPs) that can assist SSF to reach the standards required for certification. Despite limited direct knowledge of the MSC, Caribbean SSF fisherfolk saw the MSC as a marginalization threat based on the international discourse on eco-labelling in other developing countries struggling with global seafood market disadvantages. This very much overshadowed the potential benefits of the MSC's developmental stewardship initiatives for SSF in their view. In Suriname, McConney et al. (2021) found that the MSC certification of the industrial Atlantic seabob fishery had little impact on attitudes towards stewardship in SSF although there was a fairly high level of compliance in the export-oriented fishery in order to maintain the acquired MSC eco-label.

The second case was from the first phase of Too Big To Ignore (TBTI) partnership on SSF in which the author served as leader of a working group on "enhancing the stewardship". This was a diverse group of like-minded applied SSF researchers and students who were keen to connect to SSF industry participants in order to make a difference in stewardship. In contrast to the MSC, stewardship in this case focused on applying information exchange to collective decision-making for sustainable use in SSF. This was seen as comprising three steps: understanding the social-ecological SSF system, participatory monitoring and evaluation of the system, and collective decision-making followed by practical stewardship action. The group experienced good SSF research engagement and networking, but the practical activities were insufficient to achieve a stewardship transformation in the few SSF engaged. McConney et al. (2014) capture the diverse contributions of many authors to the thinking about SSF stewardship. Most important, the working group's theory of change was widely accepted by Caribbean fisherfolk and this informed other SSF initiatives such as the case described next.

The full title of the 2018-2021 FAO StewardFish project, funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), was 'Developing Organizational Capacity for Ecosystem Stewardship and Livelihoods in Caribbean Small-Scale Fisheries'. The

project was partly inspired by TBTI work described above, but added the dimension of transboundary spatial and jurisdictional scales as it covered capacity development coordinated across seven countries of the Caribbean Large Marine Ecosystem (CLME). It explicitly used a social-ecological system design to operationalize stewardship with a focus primarily on Caribbean fisherfolk organization capacities. It saw stewardship as the capacity of fisherfolk to govern and participate in good governance of SSF. Unlike the TBTI working group, StewardFish was able to implement many fisherfolk capacity development initiatives that were highly participatory at multiple levels of governance. Although the concept of stewardship in relation to governance is not as well internalized in Caribbean fisherfolk organizations as co-management and other aspects of SSF sustainable use it gained ground during the project given the buy-in from target beneficiaries. Stewardship was linked to gender mainstreaming, policy engagement, ecosystem approaches, livelihoods and other aspects of SSF governance that were more familiar. Of the three cases, this one came closest to institutionalizing an understanding and demonstration of stewardship.

In conclusion, there are several lessons learned and recommendations for thinking about the future of stewardship in Caribbean SSF. Within this introspection I conclude that several facets of stewardship could be strengthened by better integration, from policy to practice, since there is merit in better institutionalizing the concept of social-ecological stewardship in Caribbean SSF. In addition, although gender and youth were addressed, especially in the StewardFish project, there is much more scope to focus further on youth, young people and the inter-generational responsibilities required to sustain stewardship. This is most fundamental in order to nurture leadership. In Caribbean small island developing states (SIDS) there is an urgent need to see stewardship as intersectoral, not just within fisheries, in ecosystem approaches. This must be priority for the future in the context of developing blue economies that also focus in tourism, energy, minerals, transportation, etc.. Rather than fear the many blue economy initiatives as inevitably exacerbating SSF marginalization, fisherfolk should influence policy, planning and practice to make stewardship an active part of the narratives and discourses for their well-being. The global and regional celebrations of 2022 as the International Year of Artisanal Fisheries and Aquaculture (IYFA 2022) provides new opportunity for re-thinking stewardship and promoting it as a central concept and practice for the sustainability of SSF in the Caribbean.

**KEYWORDS:** Caribbean, fisheries, small-scale, stewardship

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