

Q & A

Interview with “Gracinha” Maria das Graças Alencar de Aquino,
Morro Branco, Brazil

Maria is the President of the Fisher Association of Morro Branco, a primary school teacher and community organizer in Morro Branco, a traditional fishing village on the east coast in the municipality of Beberibe, Ceará, Brazil

By René Schärer, (fishnet@uol.com.br), Member of ICSF

Did fishers always have the right to fish in Morro Branco?

Yes, in the past, the fishery was very good; there was plenty of fish and shrimp and lobsters, and everybody had access. There was no industrial fleet, the sea had many different species and coastal populations were small—all these were factors that favoured the artisanal fisheries.

Did the fishers have to struggle to get the right to fish?

No, until 1970, there was free access. Then, the government began to issue licences for the lobster fishery, but everybody continued to fish since there was no control and enforcement.

And what is status of the right to fish lobsters now?

In 2004, the government created the lobster management committee and it became mandatory to get licences to continue fishing, but not all the boatowners were able to get a licence—some got compensation; others were locked out. The government simply forgot about them.

What about the shrimp fishery?

In the past, everybody fished for shrimp using either small trawlers or trammel nets. Ten years ago, motorized trawlers in the five-mile zone were prohibited, making this a zone for artisanal fishers. But there is no enforcement of the law—everybody keeps fishing and that is the problem.

Does this problem create conflicts between fishers?

Yes, it does. Although our fishers fish with sail boats that have less impact, the motorized fleet destroys the sea floor. The conflict is intense because there is very little enforcement. Two years ago, when there were 40 trawlers in our fishing area, we informed the sea police, but by the time the enforcement boat arrived, everybody had left. One of the fishing company owners started to threaten members of our association. We feel pretty helpless.

How did your forefathers gain the right to live on the beach property?

Fishers who were the first inhabitants of Morro Branco had no problem building their houses on the beach. The owner of the land normally granted permission to the fishers to build their houses. But when he died, things changed and speculation took over.

Is your community organized and prepared to fight for fisher's rights?

Yes, today we have a fishers association and we are working with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other communities to create a Marine Protected Area on the east coast of Ceará to help the cause of fishers' rights. 🇧🇷