

Free to Move

Belize, a pioneer in fisheries conservation, has become the first country to adopt a national, multispecies territorial user rights programme

Belize has always attracted great environmental attention, especially since the country boasts having the second largest coral reef complex in the world, which stretches 185 miles, making it the longest in the Western hemisphere. For the average Belizean, it is national pride to protect the country's ecosystem. For some, it is an attraction for investments and tourism development. In the midst of this, there are the small-scale fishers who depend on the marine resources for a livelihood.

Compared to its Caribbean friends, Belize has always been pioneers in fisheries conservation. No exceptional

How is the new regime being managed in Belize? As described by a fisher, there is a Manage Access Committee created for each fishing zone. This committee comprises stakeholders, including fishers. The committee is responsible for the management of a specific fishing zone. It vets and approves the 'manage access' fishing licences. A licensed fisher is limited to two fishing areas. When a fisher leader, who is a member of the committee, was asked if it is possible to change fishing zones, he said yes, subject to the case going to the committee. However, if that fisher has had a previous offence, it would be difficult to change fishing zones.

Another woman fisher, replying to the same question, stated that designating two zones in the first instance would be difficult. The zones are over-populated and there is less space to fish. A lot of the good fishing areas are being protected and are no-take zones.

Further responses to this question revealed that fishing communities were unable to find out who has licences to fish in their waters. "We should be able to access the list of licence holders and be able to verify that these people legitimately deserve to hold a licence", observed a fisher. While a fisher gave the example of a red tide (a rare occurrence for Belize) and another spoke about hurricanes, they both shared the same view about the fate of fishers during the time of natural disasters, where some areas are more affected than others.

Tenure rights

Will they be allowed to venture into other zones freely and easily? A community of fishers felt that, at times, the powers that be do not fully

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surprises, then, when, in 2011, the Fisheries Department, in collaboration with the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs), launched a Manage Access Pilot Project (MAPP) in the general-use zones of the Port Honduras Marine Reserve and Glover's Reef Reserve. Then, in 2016, there was a national roll-out where the 3,000 traditional fishers were divided into nine fishing zones. This was a world record breaker, as Belize became the first country to adopt a national, multispecies territorial user rights programme. For this article, a small sample of fishers and co-operative workers were briefly interviewed about the MAPP in Belize. They spoke about areas of governance, enforcement, fishing and tenure rights.

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appreciate the input of the fishers as they would initially contribute in the consultations but often find that changes are made that they are not aware of or did not agree to. They also think that some of the processes are cumbersome—for example, the acquisition of licences. They have to spend a day going to Belize City to get these licences. A day lost means spending money and not making any.

One fisher claimed that all the fisheries-management tools were in place in some fashion or the other, prior to the access-management regimes. For example, he remembered how many years ago, the fisheries division used to collect data from fishers at the fishing co-operatives and, even more recently, the co-operatives collect data when they are invoiced, including those related to fishing grounds, etc. Essentially, that earlier system was even better because, as reported by many fishers, they were having great difficulties with the Manage Access logbook system for collecting catch data. The fisher suggested: “I could tell them, keep all the management tools and just take away the zoning, but they would not agree.” I was curious to know why he made such a statement. He elaborated on behalf of the other fishers who fish in many different areas of Belize, from north to south, how the zoning affects their free movements to access different fishing areas.

Enforcement is one area of the programme many fishers welcomed. A few commented that patrolling will check piracy at sea. In addition, they said, it will prevent illegal fishing by non-Belizean fishers. Moreover, local fishers are accustomed to the fisheries regulations such as open and close seasons/size limits for prime species as lobster and conch; most are, therefore, accustomed to complying with the regulations. One fisher interviewed spoke about witnessing large overseas fishing vessels fishing far away in the deep sea at night. These vessels are so big they light up like a city. He said given an opportunity, those large vessel owners would also be interested in the traditional areas of the Belizean artisanal fishers.

One community of fishers wished that enforcement should not be selective. “It seems as if they are aware that our waters are being exploited by foreigners, who do not have licences! Even when reporting to the authorities that there is not enough being done to stop illegal fishing, the authorities claim they do not have the resources”. Another fisher leader commented: “I see other boats that are not coded for my zone fishing in the area. We need to ensure we have sufficient patrols”. Several fishers pointed to the need for more awareness and information sharing about the fishing regulations.

On the topic of fishers’ and tenure rights, one person commented that fisherfolk need to be organized and have a team of qualified advisers. He further stated that the NGOs and other organizations should have a full team, including lawyers, executive directors and trained specialists; likewise, the fishers of Belize need strength and people on their team 24 hours a day, seven days a week to help fight and defend their rights. This interviewee went on further to quote the Constitution of Belize, which speaks of the freedom of movement and suggested that fishers should be knowledgeable about all

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Sail boats docked at a fishing cooperative in Belize. The fishers want management that is fair, equitable, transparent and reliable, which includes meaningful community consultations

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Lobsters in a fishing processing plant in Belize. Local fishers are accustomed to the fisheries regulations such as open and close seasons/size limits for lobster and conch

laws, regulations and policies that affect their well-being.

I took the opportunity to give him a copy of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (the SSF Guidelines) and highlighted Part 2 Responsible fisheries and sustainable development. Here it states that *“small-scale fishing communities need to have secure tenure rights to the resources that form the basis for their social and cultural well-being, their livelihoods and their sustainable development”*.

Another response on the topic was from a woman fisher who spoke strongly for alternative livelihood opportunities in Belize. She stated that there are barely any marketable products and she observes a lot of control over fisherfolk. Feeling compelled to provide for her home, she is interested in anything that can bring an income to her and her family.

Another commented that there is also the anxiety that their fishing grounds are shrinking, often to accommodate the tourism industry: “We allow outsiders to come and dictate when/where fishing should be done without regard for the legitimacy of fishers using these resources to make a living.” Jackie Sunde, in her abstract “Expressions of Tenure in South Africa in the context of the Small-Scale Fisheries Guidelines”, says

that tenure relations lie at the heart of the livelihoods of small-scale fishing communities who depend on their access to, and control of, fisheries and other natural resources in order to realize their right to food as well as a range of other human rights.

Fishers want a sustainable fishing industry, and some are willing to place some confidence in the new fisheries initiative in Belize. When a seasoned fisher was asked about his views about Manage Access, his response was: “You (pointing to me) will have to monitor it”. This was understood to mean that the initiative is in its infant stage, and different stages will produce different challenges. Meanwhile, fishers cling on to the hope of better profits and an improved fishing industry.

My overall assessment, after discussions with some fisheries experts of Belize, is that the fishers of the country want management that is fair, equitable, transparent and reliable, which includes meaningful community consultations. In addition, the social and cultural issues of fishers must not be ignored in the process. Clearly, fishers are not asking for fisheries conservation in the guise of fisheries management. As stated in the Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations’ vision, all fishers want is to have sustainable fishing industries that are mainly owned and governed by fisherfolk who enjoy a good quality of life, achieved through the ecosystem-based management of fisheries resources. ¶

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http://dlc.dlib.indiana.edu/dlc/bitstream/handle/10535/2157/Gray_141801.pdf?sequence=1

Producing Success: Co-Management of a Marine Protected Area in Belize

<http://www.cirp.org.tt/cnfo/>

The Caribbean Network of Fisherfolk Organisations (CNFO)