

Amplifying Fishers' Voices

Environmental non-governmental organizations can work in partnership with fishing communities to secure vibrant fishing communities and thriving marine ecosystems

38

Abundant, biodiverse oceans and increased food and prosperity for small-scale fisheries are within our reach. There is an incredible groundswell of people and organizations working to realize the vision set forth in the FAO Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines), with small-scale fishing communities taking the lead in designing and implementing solutions. Environmental NGOs, including the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), share the vision of thriving, healthy oceans and small-scale fisheries that provide sustainable and stable livelihoods for coastal communities, essential nutrients and a secure source of food for millions. Much has already been accomplished, yet it is clear that in order to achieve widespread impact, more could be done to amplify the efforts already underway by fishing communities.

Partnerships among small-scale fishing communities, NGOs, local governments and scientists can capture existing solutions and experiences, create new solutions together and broadly disseminate them. Environmental NGOs can help support the growing momentum for sustainable small-scale fisheries by bringing experiences, lessons learned, skills and connections to support other fishing communities in working towards the conservation of our oceans. Drawing from experiences from a few fisheries we work in, we share here our ideas on how environmental NGOs can work in partnership with fishing communities to secure vibrant fishing communities and thriving marine ecosystems.

Environmental NGOs working in fisheries can play an important

role in helping bring often unseen and historically disenfranchised small-scale fishing communities and vulnerable groups such as women and indigenous peoples to the decision-making table. Experience shows that fishery-management solutions are most durable when local fishers and fishworkers lead the way. We have seen first-hand how fishers can be powerful agents of change when they are at the forefront of defining fishery goals and solutions that make sense for their fishing operations. This impact can be even greater when working with local governments, researchers and NGOs. By building mechanisms for community engagement—whether through co-management systems, social media movements, capacity development or institution building—environmental NGOs can help elevate fishers' voices in the decision-making process.

In Belize, for example, a group of local and international NGOs partnered with the government and fishing communities to ensure fishers had a role in designing and implementing Managed Access, the nation's new fisheries management system. This system gives fishers secure rights to fish in designated zones and co-management responsibilities through Managed Access Committees.

Consulting role

These groups are responsible for representing the interests of communities and contributing to local decision making. Each multi-stakeholder committee comprises representatives from each fishing community, representatives from the Belize Fisheries Department and NGOs in a consulting role. Through these committees, local fishers are empowered to contribute their views and act as co-managers for their fishing areas.

This article is by Alexis Rife, Oceans Program, EDF; Muhammad Khazali, YBUL-EDF Program Indonesia; Paula Williams, Fisher from Punta Negra, Belize and Chairperson for Punta Negra Village, Punta Negra Women's Group, and Fisher Representative on Managed Access Committee Areas 4 and 5; José Luis García Varas, WWF Spain; and Pamela Ruiter, Oceans Program, EDF (please direct correspondence to: arife@edf.org)



Three fishermen from Lampung in Indonesia setting their gillnets to catch blue swimming crab. Lampung's BSC management plan is the first in Indonesia to empower local stakeholders, including women, fishers, processors and supply-chain workers in the decision-making process

Guiding management decisions with strong science is essential for the long-term viability of fishing communities, especially in the face of climate change. NGOs can help ensure effective management is in place by drawing upon the best available science and engaging fishing communities in the scientific process. This can include supporting fishing communities in contributing to improved data collection and participating in decision making that draws upon local and customary knowledge. By working hand-in-hand with communities, NGOs can help ensure that even fisheries with limited data benefit from science-based decision making that promotes long-term sustainability.

In Spain, for example, EDF and WWF-Spain partnered with fishers to build capacity to improve data collection for science-based decisionmaking. We participate on two co-management committees and have helped build six new co-management processes where fishers, government, scientists and NGOs are working together to establish long-term management plans based on strong science. Drawing from the knowledge of fishers, co-management

bodies established reserves and prioritized species for management. The involvement of fishers has increased confidence in the accuracy of decisionmaking and management measures.

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depend on them. Policies can help to create the enabling conditions for successful implementation of the SSF Guidelines and establish governance structures that contribute to effective management. Adoption of policy reform at a local level can often motivate changes at broader scales.

Broad coalition

A broad coalition of fishers, seafood buyers and NGOs began working in

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40

Women play a central role in Belize's fisheries, selling at the Punta Gorda fish market to communities that cherish the seafood Belize's Barrier Reef provides. Small-scale fishing communities should have secure rights to fishery resources and fishing grounds

the Indonesian Province of Lampung in 2015 to improve management of the blue swimming crab (BSC) fishery, a critical source of livelihoods for thousands of Indonesians. This coalition worked with the provincial and national government to create a brand new process for collaborative management that included the formal establishment of a multi-stakeholder body to design and implement the science-based management plan. Lampung's BSC management plan is the first in Indonesia to empower local stakeholders, including women, fishers, processors and supply-chain workers in the decision-making process. We hope that this plan can serve as a model for other provinces in Indonesia and beyond.

Small-scale fishing communities should have secure rights to fishery resources and fishing grounds. Based on the goals of fishing communities, NGOs can help strengthen the tenure rights of small-scale fishers and support the design of systems that are equitable and socio-culturally appropriate. NGOs can also help ensure that special consideration is given to women and indigenous groups such that their rights are secured. Experience has

shown that fishers with secure rights are champions for sustainable fisheries management because they have a stake in the future of their fisheries and increased stewardship of their resources.

A working group of government and NGO representatives helped guide the design process for Managed Access in Belize, which has strengthened the tenure rights of small-scale fishers and improved fishers' ability to be stewards of the resource. Under this approach, fishers and fishing communities have dedicated access rights to fishing areas they have traditionally used and now feel more secure in the future of their livelihoods. These rights are paired with responsibilities to help manage the areas and observe regulations. Following the implementation of this system, fishers report reductions in illegal fishing, high participation in community-based co-management groups and improvements in ecosystem health.

Knowledge exchange

Small-scale fishing communities are often dispersed and isolated, with little means to share ideas, experiences and solutions with others. By building

platforms for exchange amongst fishing communities, NGOs can create opportunities for knowledge exchange, shared learning and collaboration. Such peer-to-peer exchange allows for fishing community members and leaders to share solutions, which can then be brought back to individual fishing communities and put into action for improved management and conservation. Learning networks and exchanges can often spur collective action towards common goals for increased impact towards sustainable fisheries.


Collaboration between EDF, WWF-Spain and fishers helped to bring small-scale fisheries into the national conversation and the political agenda in Spain. We supported the establishment of a national learning network, which has provided a means for fishing communities and other fisheries stakeholders to share achievements and experiences, as well as resources and tools to help advance their strategies. This learning network is actively collaborating on over a dozen participatory processes, projects and initiatives to establish long-term management plans involving more than 3,500 fishers. By including fishers and other stakeholders such as government officials and NGOs, we have seen increased understanding between groups and improved communication around difficult challenges.

As we look to the future, we believe environmental NGOs can play an additional role in helping fishing communities adapt to the impacts of climate change, enhancing food and nutrition security. Research by EDF and partners shows that it is possible to have increased fish abundance and catch, providing more food and prosperity for fishers if we get good management in place now and keep warming in check. NGOs can partner with communities to ensure they are empowered with the skills and knowledge needed to build climate-resilient fisheries. Furthermore, small-scale fisheries provide critical sources of protein and micronutrients to hundreds of millions of people. By fully understanding and considering the co-benefits and trade-offs between development, food security and conservation outcomes, NGOs and fishing communities

can together optimize fisheries management to meet the nutritional needs of vulnerable communities.

While much progress has been made toward sustainable small-scale fisheries, NGOs can help amplify the scale and pace of fishery reforms. To scale solutions and drive widespread results, local leaders must be further supported and empowered to drive change in their own communities. Environmental NGOs can help document and disseminate lessons, experiences and solutions across regions and countries through development of innovative tools, resources and knowledge-sharing platforms. We can also work to amplify the voices of fishers around the world and elevate small-scale fishery sustainability as a policy priority in order to generate more resources for local leaders and communities.

Think creatively

Local fishers lead the way to ensuring abundant fisheries and thriving fishing communities. As we confront the global and dispersed nature of small-scale fisheries, we are eager to collaborate with others to think creatively about ways to support implementation of the SSF Guidelines. We look forward to working with communities, other NGOs and the FAO to do so. We also welcome further ideas from readers as to how environmental NGOs can further support fishing communities and the implementation of the SSF Guidelines. 

For more



<http://fisherysolutionscenter.edf.org/resource-subject/small-scale-fisheries>

EDF Fishery Solutions Center

<http://fisherysolutionscenter.edf.org/sites/catchshares.edf.org/files/Smith%20et%20al%202019%20-%20A%20framework%20for%20allocating%20fishing%20rights%20in%20small-scale%20fisheries.pdf>

A framework for allocating fishing rights in small-scale fisheries