

Report of the Virtual Fisher Forum 2020

COVID19 and Fishers in the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico: Impact, Perspectives & Outlooks

Thursday 5 November, 12:00 - 13:00 (EST), Virtual

Recognizing the limitations of virtual meetings, as well as growing “zoom-fatigue”, Forum organizers opted for a highly reduced program. Instead, and to mitigate the situation slightly, the committee decided to develop, “Fisher Features” which highlighted the work of past GMA winners. To date, 8 GMA winners have been Featured Fishers and these are included on the F4F FaceBook at <https://www.facebook.com/hashtag/fisherfeature> (Figure 1).

The virtual forum was moderated by Don DeMaria and Cap’t Scott Hickman and Panelists: Sylvia White, Dannie James, Ron Surrency, Andres Maldonado, Cecil Marquez, and Winsbert Harry. Support for the Forum was provided by Will Heyman and Ruth Perry. The forum was recorded and is available at <https://youtu.be/SALt57lwUzI?t=7165>.

Presentations were offered by Cecil Marquez, Scott Hickman, Dannie James, and Andres Maldonado. Gladding Memorial Award Winners shared perspectives on how COVID-19 has impacted their communities and how their communities are working together to respond to these impacts.

Cecil Marquez from Grenada reported that their market for all seafood typically generated from pot fishers, longline fishers, lobster fishers and others. Yellowfin tuna is the primary target for Cecil and his community with an almost entirely export market that typically generates millions of dollars from exports to the United States. All transportation between Grenada and the U.S. (and all international travel) were halted due to the pandemic. Local hotels also typically buy fish, but they have been shuttered. Fishers in his community continued to catch a few of these sashimi-grade giants but immediately flooded the local market so the price was reduced by 50%. We’ve had enough food and eaten more yellowfin tuna than any time before in their life!

All fishers have lost all their income both from export and sale to local hotels. Fishers began to salt fish to preserve them, given the high cost of refrigeration. The impacts have been similar in other islands. The psychological, economic and societal stress on families was island-wide. Women are particularly effected. Many are vendors, some are boat owners. But many are also single parents, responsible for maintaining households. While male fishers are largely care free, women bear the burden of family support. Cecil has seen fear in their eyes and in their voices. They are experiencing the fear of not being able to feed their children, pay their mortgages, and live normal lives.

Cecil reported that fishers have been donating fish to support communities whose livelihoods have dried up during the pandemic. Vulnerability and fragility of the sector of small scale fisheries in small islands due to nearly exclusive dependence on external markets. But he insists, “We can’t operate alone. We are part of the global village”. Cecil advocates for the development and diversification of the small scale fisheries sector to be able to withstand this type of global shock. He states that the future must include exploration of alternative and expanded markets, inter-island trade, explore fish preservation using smoke and salt, and building stronger cooperatives that are able to bear the burden of supporting fishers in time of need including retirement, and food security. We need to plan, strategize, and mobilize along with all sectors that include government, NGOs, fishers and others.

In the face of challenges imposed by the pandemic, Cecil has seen an impressive rise in the number and power of women stepping up to face challenges, demonstrating leadership skills, building and organizing, and showing high spirit and inspiration. Cecil has been assisting women groups in these efforts but believes that they need more support. Cecil sees the need to stand together. He still sees a beautiful future.

Sylvia White from Barbados explained impact of COVID-19 impacted on all aspects of her life and those of everyone in the fishing sector. She has been a fish processor and vendor for the last 28 years and is solely dependent on the industry, along with several other women. Everyday life has been changed. She is the sole bread-winner, and has huge emotional, mental and financial impacts. She did not have savings to be ready for the shock. Government imposed curfews and social distancing reduced access to buyers and created long lines. Fish sales dropped. The fish took longer to offload, based on less purchasers and restaurant closures. Prices increased so buying was further reduced and consumers bought smaller amounts. The pandemic hit at the low season while and sargasso impacts came at the worst time.

Exporters were affected, crew members lost jobs. Some days we had lots of catch but processing and storage was a problem. Women were impacted most given restrictions on their time. Ordinary production was cut in half. Boat owners had no provisions for repairs or safety assistance. All of the safety nets have been removed.

We had do more marketing, increase marketing, planning, home deliveries, packaging and storing bags of small amounts that could be sold directly to consumers. Vendors went on the road to sell in remote areas. They advertised on social media and have been looking for ways to save money.

Changes in the community. Elders required more assistance from youngers. Fishers shared their products with those in need through Department of Welfare. Farmers did the same. Insurance companies offered some support to front line, essential workers but fishers were only asked to participate at the last minute and did not benefit from the programs.

Future – we need more planning and preparedness for future shock. More programs, trainings, and preparation, putting money aside for the future.

Andres Maldonado from Puerto Rico discussed quarantine effects except for essential workers including fishers. So they could fish, but buyers and markets were closed. So he, his son and buyer and others made an announcement offering product which gradually opened some sales. Through clever and diversified markets, Andres and other fishers were able to have some, albeit greatly reduced sales. There was some support from government for some sectors but the Department of Agriculture, offered no support to fishers.

Cap't Scott Hickman from Galveston Texas, reported that his business, charter fishing was busier than it had ever been. He explained that since international travel had been so heavily reduced, and that people were locked up for so long, they were longing for vacations that they could do without flying. Beach house rentals and charter fishing on small boats became very attractive and bookings were at an all-time high during the summer of 2020. The "P.P.P." program from the US Government was a huge assistance. Though the trips were conducted on open-air vessels with a maximum of six anglers, guides and guests largely took appropriate precautions, including masking if there was any possible risk

of infection. Scott mentioned that the supply chain was changed completely. Fishers could still catch fish but normal markets did not exist (e.g. local markets). More creativity was required. New markets were developed including local deliveries, packaged and pre-made meals, deliveries to individuals.

Dannie James, Rastafari woman, boat owner, and fisherwoman from St. Lucia presented (in writing) on the specific effects of COVID-19 on livelihoods of women in the fishing sector. Primary sales for her fish products were traditionally to restaurants that cater to tourist. She explained that here industry was largely halted since tourists have stopped coming, restaurants have stopped buying and even local fish markets were shuttered. In order to maintain some income, she and her family have diversified their income sources. Her sons began to grow sea-moss and she and her family have moved to local fish sales where they package, clean and deliver fish to customers that pre-order. She has even begun to fry fish and chips and selling them from her home. Nonetheless, her total income was reduced by 60%. In spite of promises from the government of St. Lucia, no assistance has been provided to fisherfolk. Dannie's cooperative started the pandemic in good financial shape. Her cooperative donated \$500 to each of its members. Other cooperatives were not so lucrative and were not able to support members.

In addition to all of the other problems, government blamed fishers (without evidence) for human and drug trafficking from Martinique. Without consultation, government suspended all fishing licenses on October 30th 2020. Fisherfolk reacted immediately and negotiated a lift of the ban in less than a week and fishes could return to the sea.

Dannie stated that fisherfolks have been marginalized and disrespected and have struggled through the pandemic St. Lucia but she maintains a positive outlook and looks forward to better days.

Panel Session: Panelists included speakers mentioned above plus Don DeMaria, Winsbert Harry and others. Some summary comments are below.

COVID impacts are expected to get worse. Fishers will face more challenges. Nonetheless, though most fishers have been affected heavily, they largely maintain a positive attitude and continue to help others in their communities. Fishers agree on the need for market diversification and creativity in marketing. Women play a critical role in fisheries. COVID has helped everyone to realize this, more than they have in the past. Women should be further supported with training, given their critical role in the industry and in supporting families. Fishers should continue to make their own provisions for future shocks through cooperatives, savings, market diversification, collaboration with other sectors and other means. After the pandemic, when people start to move again, we may see huge increase in international travel, tourism, and fishery pressure, so be prepared to handle the influx by watching out for and conserving resources and building safety nets and savings for the future.

FISHER FEATURE



ELOY CUEVAS
BELIZE

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2005

FISHER FEATURE



ANDERSON KINCH
BARBADOS

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2005

FISHER FEATURE



CASIMIRO NEWBALL
PROVIDENCIA, COLOMBIA

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2012

FISHER FEATURE



ANDRES MALDONADO
PUERTO RICO

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2009

FISHER FEATURE



MITCH LAY
ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2009

FISHER FEATURE



EDDIE TOOMER
FLORIDA, UNITED STATES

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2013

FISHER FEATURE



ANGELICA MENDEZ
GUATEMALA

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2010

FISHER FEATURE



ABEL RUIZ
HICACO, PANAMA

GLADDING MEMORIAL AWARD WINNER 2015

Figure 1: Fisher Features