



Belize Fisheries Project
Full Report on Stakeholder Workshops and Meetings
Held in Belize, December 4 - 8, 2023

March 4, 2024

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Introduction

The Belize Fisheries Project brings together a team of local and international experts in healthy reefs and small-scale fisheries to evaluate new and existing information and facilitate discussions about the current status and management of fisheries in Belize. The team has analyzed publicly available scientific information about Belize’s fisheries and has shared and discussed its findings with stakeholders, including the Belizean government, fishers, managers, and others involved or interested in fisheries in Belize, to understand their perceptions as well as ideas for the future. The project has implemented and will continue to take a transparent and participatory process to engage all interested stakeholders. Our goal is to support Belize in the long-term conservation, management, and sustainable use of its fisheries resources.

This project is taking place as Belize is working to implement its 2020 Fisheries Resources Act, expand its Blue Economy, conduct various activities under the Blue Bond, including development of the Belize Sustainable Ocean Plan, and develop a marine and coastal Project Finance for Permanence (“Resilient Bold Belize”). The confluence of these efforts provides a unique opportunity to ensure and support healthy, resilient, and sustainable fisheries. For example, under the Blue Bonds Loan Act, 2021, Belize committed to implementing a fisheries governance framework “consistent with transparent, science based, socially responsible international best practices,” which includes “sustainable harvest of target species.”¹ Findings shared and discussions facilitated by the Belize Fisheries Project provide further insights into supporting sustainable fisheries and livelihoods in Belize, aiming to contribute to the well-being of coastal communities.

The Belize Fisheries Project brings together experts from Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI), the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), the Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI), MRAG Americas, and The Sea Around Us (SAU)/University of British Columbia, as well as an independent consultant trained in ecology and fisheries and who has specific experience in Belize’s fisheries and those of the wider region. Collectively, the project partners have many decades of global experience in and a commitment to fisheries that are ecologically sustainable and provide good livelihoods for fishers, help support coastal communities, and contribute to national economies.

More information about the project and team members is available on the project’s webpage: <https://www.eli.org/belize-fisheries-project>.

¹ Belize. Blue Bonds Loan Act, 2021. Conservation Funding Agreement, Annex A: Conservation Commitments. Available on: <https://www.nationalassembly.gov.bz/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Act-No-28-of-2021-Blue-Bonds-Loan.pdf> (last accessed on July 10, 2023).

Purpose of the Report

This report provides a summary of the results of several workshops and meetings held in Belize during the week of December 4, 2023. These activities had a primary aim of meeting with fishers and other stakeholders in Belize to exchange information and understand fishers' ideas for strengthening fisheries management. The December fishers' workshops were a direct follow-up to workshops held with fishers in June 2023. This report also summarizes discussions of meetings the team had with the Belize government and NGOs during the same week.

Recap of the June 2023 meetings and workshops

From June 12 to June 16, 2023, the project team held workshops with fishers and had meetings with the Belize government and other stakeholders, including marine protected area (MPA) co-managers and other NGOs.

The objectives of these workshops and meetings were to:

- Present a compilation of existing, publicly available information and new analyses of the state of fisheries, conservation, and management;
- Understand how the information presented compares with stakeholders' perspectives, knowledge, and experiences on the water;
- Understand stakeholders' experience with participation in the management process; and
- Discuss possible sustainable fishery management actions.

There were three workshops with fishers held across the country. In these workshops, the project team shared its draft analysis of new and existing information about fisheries in Belize and sought fishers' perspectives about the status and management of the fisheries on which they depend. The fishers' experiences shared during the workshops broadly aligned with the team's scientific assessment of the stocks, including conch and lobster. Fishers also shared other concerns they had about the fishery, including problems related to illegal fishing, insufficient enforcement, broader oversight of the fishing industry through licensing and cooperatives, and more. Fishers also shared their ideas about ways to strengthen fishing communities and discussed how they would like to play a larger role in decision-making processes.

December 2023 meetings and workshops

In December, there were again three workshops held with fishers in different parts of the country. Building on the information discussed during the June workshops, the team shared its projections of stock status for conch and lobster under a range of future levels of fishing (status quo and different levels of catch reduction) and provided an overview of management

approaches for these species used in fisheries throughout the world. The workshop participants then discussed possible management changes for the fisheries and MPAs.

Several members of the team met with Belizean government representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Economic Development, and Investment, including the Climate Finance Unit, as well as representatives from the Ministry of Tourism. The team also hosted a meeting with NGOs and others to present the new management projections and to discuss initial feedback from the fisher workshops. The NGO meeting had both virtual and in-person attendees. Several members of the team were also interviewed about the Belize Fisheries Project on two television morning shows during the week.

The objectives of these workshops and meetings were to:

- Share international best practices for fisheries management;
- Engage stakeholders in conversations about the state of fisheries resources, including the team's latest technical analyses of Belizean fisheries;
- Facilitate discussions to support stakeholders having the information they need for effective decision-making; and
- Provide a forum for discussion of potential approaches to achieve healthy and sustainable fisheries.

Workshops with Fishers

The team held three workshops with fishers to recap the stock assessment findings presented in June, present new management projections for conch and lobster stocks, and describe international best practices in fisheries management. The primary goal was to learn from fishers about what management measures they felt could work for their fisheries, what type of transition might be needed to implement management measures, and how the marine protected areas could be strengthened and made more equitable.

The team organized these workshops with the support of the Belize Federation of Fishers. Sixty-one fishers from 12 communities across Belize attended the workshops. Twenty-eight of the 61 fishers who attended December workshops had participated in one of the June workshops.² Fishers had varied levels of experience, ranging from one or two years of experience fishing to 40 years or more. Participants included members of fishing cooperatives, the Belize Federation of Fishers, and local fishing associations.

² In total, 107 fishers have attended at least one of the workshops held in June or December 2023. This includes 36 fishers from the North, 31 fishers from Belize City, and 40 fishers from the South. These fishers come from Belize City (specifically the Vernon Street, North Front Street, Barracks, and Yabra areas), Caledonia, Chunox Village, Copper Bank Village, Corozal, Dangriga, Georgetown, Hopkins Village, Independence, Monkey River, Placencia, Punta Gorda, Punta Negra, Riversdale Village, San Estevan, Sarteneja Village, and Seine Bight Village communities.

- Workshop 1 took place on Monday, December 4, in Stann Creek. Nineteen fishers from the communities of Punta Gorda, Monkey River, Independence, Georgetown, Riversdale, and Dangriga attended the workshop. Fishers who attended this workshop generally sell their catch to Rainforest Seafood, National Co-op, and within their communities.
- Workshop 2 took place on Wednesday, December 6, in Belize City. Twenty-three fishers from Belize City attended the workshop. Participants included members of the National and Northern co-ops, as well as unaffiliated fishers.
- Workshop 3 took place on Thursday, December 7, in Corozal. Nineteen fishers from Sarteneja, Caledonia, Chunox, Corozal, and San Estevan attended this workshop. Participants included members of the National and Northern co-ops, as well as unaffiliated fishers.

Each workshop began with the project team recapping the stock assessment information shared in June, then sharing new projections of catch and biomass for management of conch and lobster. The team also presented the basics of fisheries management, international best practices for fisheries management, and pathways to sustainability. The team encouraged fishers to ask questions and share their knowledge and reactions throughout each workshop. The full presentation in English, which was shown at the Stann Creek and Belize City Workshops, can be viewed [here](#). The same presentation with key concepts translated into Spanish, which was shown in Corozal, can be viewed [here](#).

Following the presentations, questions, and comments, workshop participants engaged in small group discussions. There were four small groups in each workshop, and representatives from each group presented the results of their discussions to all workshop participants.

The first small group discussion aimed to capture fishers' feelings about current bad practices on the water and possible management adjustments to set the fisheries on a path towards sustainability. The team asked fishers the following questions:

1. What can fishers do to strengthen the culture of fisheries stewardship? What are the things/activities that everyone knows are happening and everyone knows are unacceptable? What can you do about these things as a community? What kinds of cultural changes/community agreements might be needed?
2. Given the management options we have presented (or others), what management actions are workable for you and the fishing community? What are the changes that fishers, scientists, and other partners work towards together? What is needed to implement these changes?
3. These changes require a transition. What is needed to make the transition happen? What are the necessary action steps (some might be support, some might be government action, some might be market adjustments)?

The second small group discussion aimed to capture the fishers' thoughts on the protection and equitability of the marine protected areas. This discussion was pertinent in light of Belize's 30-by-30 commitment, the planned expansion of the MPAs,³ and the potential role MPAs play in the replenishment of fisheries stocks. The team posed the following questions to fishers:

1. How do we make MPAs more protective and more equitable? What management actions are reasonable (bag limits, sale limits, gear limits, etc.)? If commercial fishing is not allowed in highly protected areas, what should that mean for recreational fishing?

Findings from the Three Workshops

The following provides an overview of main points of discussion and agreement heard from fishers during the three workshops.

Critically, fishers confirmed that the stocks are in bad shape, as shown by the stock assessment results, with low availability of critical species, such as conch and lobster. Fishers told us that the situation had worsened since the workshops in June 2023, and that the 2023 lobster season had been particularly bad. Across all three workshops, fishers agreed that changes were needed to reverse current trends, improve the fisheries, and, echoing a sentiment heard in June, that fishers want to be involved in these changes.

Responding to the first question in the first breakout session, fishers highlighted a host of illegal or unsustainable practices they had observed in the fisheries. These include the catch and sale of undersized and out-of-season products, fishing in protected areas, the catch of berried female lobsters, the smashing of undersized conch to look for pearls, poaching from shades and traps, improper disposal of conch shells, use of illegal gear, setting shades on coral, and more. Fishers agreed that these types of practices are unacceptable, and that there needs to be stronger enforcement—both internally from the fishing community and externally from official entities—to prevent such behavior. However, fishers also highlighted the broader context when explaining why these activities occurred: high rates of poverty, the high costs of supplies (such as fuel needed for boats), the high number of fishers and high rates of fishing pressure, and the depleted condition of the stocks.

Fishers suggested a range of management options in response to the second question of the first breakout session. These options generally related to enforcement, licensing reform, seasons, catch limits, size limits, and gear restrictions. At each workshop, fishers highlighted the need to improve enforcement and reform the licensing system.

Regarding enforcement, fishers explained that there are not enough patrols, and patrols do not occur at the right time, including at night, to catch the most egregious rule breakers. Fishers

³ Belize Press Office. "Belize Participates in the Seventh Global Environment Facility Assembly." August 23, 2023. <https://www.pressoffice.gov.bz/belize-participates-in-the-seventh-global-environment-facility-assembly/>

reiterated, as they had in June, the need for increased patrols. Fishers had many thoughts about ways to increase the effectiveness of patrols and enforcement. These included using technology, such as drones to assist with patrolling or body cameras to ensure that enforcement is fair and applied equitably. There was also significant discussion about the possible role of fishers in monitoring and enforcement. Some fishers felt there was a role for fishers to participate directly in patrolling, with the caveat there needed to be some clear incentives for them to participate, but other fishers said that they would not participate directly in patrols, with some citing safety concerns. In several break-out sessions, fishers mentioned the existing barriers to participation in the current enforcement systems—particularly the lack of anonymity when reporting illegal behavior. Fishers explained that without the assurance of anonymity, fishers were disincentivized to report the wrongdoing they witnessed for fear of retaliation.⁴ Fishers also noted that due to the lack of cellular service in many places on the water, they cannot report illegal behavior for it to be addressed in a timely manner. With regard to management, some fishers said the penalties for illegal behavior should be increased. Others said that logbooks needed to be properly filled out and collected, which they said was not the current norm.

Fishers suggested various ways to improve licensing, which included elimination of licenses to non-citizens, elimination of commercial licenses to those who do not work primarily in commercial fishing, a license audit to remove old or duplicated licenses, reviewing all new licenses granted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and conducting an assessment of each of the managed access zones to determine the number of fishers that the area can support and adjusting the number of licenses for each zone accordingly. With each of these suggested approaches, it was important to fishers to reduce the overall number of licenses, and to have a more rigorous system in place to grant new licenses. With regard to licensing, some fishers also suggested that separate licenses should be granted for each species. While this would not inherently lower the number of licenses and the total catch, this licensing mechanism could allow for greater control over fisheries and who can legally fish.

Fishers had many different ideas about what type of seasons, quotas, size limits, and gear restrictions would work best to transition the fisheries to sustainability. They frequently mentioned extending closed seasons, increasing minimum catch sizes, and implementing science-based quotas for conch and lobster. Some fishers said that these science-based quotas would have to be much lower than the current quota to ensure replenishment of the stock. Banning hook sticks for catching lobster was also commonly mentioned, particularly at the

⁴ Some fishers suggested that one way to address this would be to use a unified fisher community to first handle enforcement issues internally. They suggested that when a fisher engaged in illegal behavior, a group of fishers from that person's community should confront them, tell them to cease illegal activity. If the illegal activity did not cease, then the fishers could go to the authorities to report it as a group.

workshops in Stann Creek and Belize City, although there was less agreement on this measure among fishers at the workshop in Corozal. There was also some discussion of complete closures of both the conch and lobster fisheries for a set period of time, although this was not commonly suggested. The fishers who raised the point suggested a 2–3-year closure for conch and a one-year closure for lobster. Fishers also suggested establishing designated areas to dispose of conch shells to address their concerns about the disposal of conch shells directly back onto the conch habitat, which they say keeps conch away from those areas.

In response to the question about what the transition would entail, fishers explained that the changes needed would require a transition, and that some assistance would be needed. Fishers discussed various ideas about the types of transitional support they would need, which generally fell into one of two categories. First, there were fishers who wanted to—or for the long-term viability of the fisheries were willing to—look to non-fishing alternatives for a transition. These fishers expressed interest in alternative livelihoods (including agriculture, aquaculture, and animal husbandry), further education (including stipends to complete high school), and additional certifications (including tour guide and divemaster certifications). Other fishers expressed more hesitation about the possibility of moving away from fishing. To enable transition, these fishers suggested fishing for finfish to relieve pressure on the conch and lobster populations, as well as staggering the closed seasons for conch and lobster to enable more continuous fishing while still shortening the current seasons for each species. Some of these fishers also suggested providing fuel tax relief to law-abiding fishers during a transition, which would help to relieve the financial pressure they say fishers face on the water that motivates illegal catch. Some fishers also called for payment in return for ceasing fishing activity. This was raised by fishers who called for a complete closure, who suggested that a stipend of two-thirds of a fisher's yearly income and allowing the fisher to cover the remaining one-third themselves would be a fair trade to completely stop fishing. Both explicitly and through the range of transition options proposed, fishers pointed out that any transition would require flexibility and/or multiple transition possibilities in order to effectively reach all fishers. Some fishers also noted that transition would need to extend to others involved in pre- and post-harvest activities and within the fisheries value chain more broadly, as any reduction in fishing would affect them as well.

For the second breakout session, the fishers expressed their perspective that the marine protected areas were not working to adequately protect the stocks within their boundaries. Fishers described inconsistent and/or inequitable enforcement by rangers within marine reserves, lack of regular patrols to prevent wrongdoing, significant take of catch by tourist operators, and other issues. Because of these issues, fishers said they do not see the spillover effects of improved abundance outside of the protected areas, and often the populations in the

protected areas are severely depleted. In one workshop, fishers suggested a survey of stocks to determine if the MPAs are working effectively.

One tangible solution fishers frequently mentioned was to increase the salaries of the rangers in the marine areas, which fishers felt would help to improve enforcement. Fishers felt that the current regulations allowing recreational take⁵ in the protected areas also presented issues. Many fishers expressed the opinion that there should be bag limits imposed on tourist operators. Others said that MPAs should be closed to recreational take completely. Some fishers said that if recreational catch was allowed, there should be more species that were designated as no take, including snook. In response to the issues around take by tourist operators, some fishers said that there should be harsher penalties for tourists and tour guides who engage in illegal behavior. Fishers felt tourism fees for recreational activities within the MPAs should be used to fund enforcement efforts. Fishers also explained that because the MPAs are not well-marked, there is sometimes confusion over what areas are protected. It was suggested that fishers could be hired to help set up and maintain demarcation of the MPAs. Fishers were clear, as they were in June, that the MPA system should not be expanded until enforcement was made effective for the current MPAs. Fishers were also clear that they want a voice in the planning of any eventual expansion of the MPAs.

Throughout the discussions, fishers continued to reiterate the need for a stronger fisher voice and more unified approach to advocating for fisher needs. This was a key theme heard in the June workshops as well. Some potential ideas for fishers to take initiative included creating a fisher code of conduct and a priority list of recommended management actions that fishers could take to the government and NGOs in order to advocate for the changes fishers seek.

While the team did not ask specifically about communication and information sharing about the fisheries, fishers at multiple workshops shared that there was a need for increased education and more effective channels of communication to disseminate information about the fisheries. Fishers provided a few specific examples of initiatives that they felt used to do a good job of this, but no longer existed. Fishers at the Stann Creek workshop discussed the fisher days that they used to have, which were a chance for the fishing community to come together, and for information to be shared. Fishers in Belize City mentioned Punta Fuego, the radio program that used to air and that shared information about fishing regulations. In both cases, fishers expressed a desire that these programs be restarted to help facilitate information sharing.

⁵ In this discussion, recreational take referred to recreational fishing where catch was kept. Catch and release fishing was not a core aspect of the discussion.

Meetings with Belizean Government Officials

On Tuesday, December 5, members of the team met with representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Economic Development, and Investment, including the Climate Finance Unit. On Friday, December 8, members of the team met with representatives from the Ministry of Tourism. During both meetings, the team discussed project findings, including the risks of increased deepwater fishing, and the importance of healthy fisheries and the economic value of Belize's eco-reputation internationally. The team also shared a [two-page Belize Fisheries Project information sheet](#) and the [HRI Mesoamerican Reef Report Card](#).

Meeting with NGOs

On Friday, December 8, the project team met with a number of marine conservation NGOs and others working in the field of marine conservation. Representatives of 12 NGOs attended, including both local and international NGOs.

The team presented participants with the information shown to fishers, including the stock assessment findings and stock projections under different management scenarios. The full presentations given to the NGOs can be viewed [here](#).

Following the presentation, meeting participants discussed the topics presented and the broader landscape of marine conservation and fisheries in Belize. There was broad agreement with the science presented. Participants expressed their concerns about the state of the fisheries, management projections if existing fishing conditions continue, and the livelihoods of fishers and fishing communities. They also discussed the need to ensure that all stakeholders work towards fisheries sustainability.

Next Steps

We will continue our efforts to engage all stakeholders to disseminate and discuss information about stock assessment findings, stock projections under different management scenarios, and potential management pathways, and we aim to continue conversations with those we met on this trip and the previous one. We will also continue to schedule training and information exchange sessions with anyone interested in learning more or having their data incorporated into the Sea Around Us stock assessments. We encourage all interested stakeholders to engage with us in support of a transition to sustainable fisheries in Belize. We welcome hearing from you.

Estamos traduciendo este informe al español. Compartiremos el reporte traducido una vez que esté disponible.