

## FISHERMEN ON THE ISLANDS AWAITING DEVELOPMENTS

# From self-regulation to international conventions

Fishing is an important source of income for the islands but the sector is also in critical need of regulations. The fishermen are learning to cope with the new reality.

BY BAUD SCHOENMAECKERS



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Fisherman from Statia

Tempers are heated among the forty fishermen from Bonaire. They've come together at a courtyard on the Bulevar Julio A. Abraham in Kralendijk to hear about the management plan for the Exclusive Economic Zone (See page 20). Words like 'registration' and 'permit' are frequently heard. "We don't agree with that", one of the fishermen calls out. "We have nothing to do with permits and we want to keep it that way." Others support him: "You're only interested in knowing exactly where and when we caught how much fish so that you can tax us." And the entire discussion is held in Papiamentu. Deputy Reynolds 'Nolly' Oleana acts as an interpreter for the Dutch authorities who have come to explain the plan. "The plan being presented here isn't about taxes."

The EEZ has been in effect since 1 September, and the fishermen consider this to be a fait accompli. "Now we can't do anything about it." The EEZ 'representatives' Hayo Haanstra (policy maker at the Ministry of Economics, Agriculture and Innovation) and Ton Akkerman (quartermaster at the same Ministry) listen more than they speak. They explain that this legal framework has created only the hull; in order to make the ship seaworthy, everyone has to work together on its construction. This means that the management plan has to be developed further. "And permits are necessary in order to give nature the chance to recover so that there will still be enough fish in twenty years' time and your children will also be able to fish", Oleana translates.

The fishermen's reply is immediate and clear. "You want to protect nature, but

who's going to protect the fishermen?" Hurricane Omar (2008) is also referred to. "Landings were destroyed and they still haven't been repaired." The topics have nothing at all to do with the EEZ. "The fishermen are using moments like this to voice their grievances and to share their problems with the authorities – with me", Oleana explains. He's not concerned about the result of the meeting because he's familiar with how the islanders behave. And that becomes obvious when, after an hour and a half, three fishermen are chosen from the group to represent the rest in the EEZ committee.

Meanwhile on St Eustatius, twelve fishermen arrive at the same time in the meeting room of the administrative office. They've elected Reynando Redan to represent the group. "The fishermen want to know exactly what the EEZ means for their work. What standard will be set for the holes in the nets that they use? How should they deal with the twelve-mile zone? And the area just beyond that? Where can they get the necessary permits? Can they or can't they continue to fish for lobster on the Saba Bank?" The management plan will contain many answers to those questions. People seem relaxed, and the fishermen have positive expectations. "Change always leads to tension. But the fishermen have a positive attitude to the EEZ and to the fact that St Eustatius is going to be a Dutch municipality", Redan explains.

### Organic fishing around Saba

A meeting of fishermen has also been held on Saba. "All of the fishermen were present. And that's unusual because this group of professionals isn't a very cohesive one", says Travis Johnson, the harbour master on Saba. "The next step is unanimously elected representation – people on Saba want that." Johnson was referring to the special combination of factors on Saba: lobster fishing, a few major fishermen and the Saba Bank (See insert on page 20). "And just like on the other islands, we have to make a distinction between recreational and economic fishing. This makes this group of professionals less cohesive since interests



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can conflict. And that makes it difficult to grant permits."

Saba has only a few commercial fishermen. But if there are ten boats with five hundred lobster traps, then five thousand of these traps are spread across the sea bottom and on the coral. These traps capture all of the fish on the coral and they destroy the reefs as they're dragged along the bottom. Fisherman Nicholas Johnson points to a trap: "I want sustainable fishing, so I make the lids of my traps from biodegradable material. That way, the lobster and the other fish can escape if I lose my trap."

The reason that traps get lost is shipping. Many of the passing cargo and oil ships as well as those at anchor fail to see the buoys that mark the traps and they sail over them. The buoy begins to bounce up and down wildly, the chain between the buoy and the trap breaks and the traps become ghost hunters for years and years. Nicholas: "The trapped fish become bait for other fish and lobster that, in turn, also become entrapped bait. A trap can remain intact for years." A lot of fishermen know that things should be done differently, but the cost of using other material makes them hesitant to take the step.

As a result of the EEZ, they'll have to invest in animal-friendly ways of fishing and they'll have to conform to stricter rules – if only because the EEZ is connected to a large number of international conventions and the fines for violations are high. Travis: "The changes will certainly benefit the fish stock. But it has to be said: most fishermen follow their own rules. Lobsters with eggs are put back in the water, as are lobsters

**"You want to protect nature but who's going to protect the fishermen?"**

that are too small. And there is continual discussion with the restaurant owners on St Maarten, the major buyers, about the desire for smaller lobsters. Small lobsters fit on a dinner plate. That's wonderful for the guests but disastrous for the lobster stock since small lobsters are still young and haven't had the chance to multiply."

Travis Johnson is a bit anxious about the changes ahead: "I hope that the Dutch will listen to the fishermen's experiences because they can learn from them. And I'll have to learn about new laws and rules so I can communicate them to the fishermen. I'm happy about the new rules and the limits that the EEZ has placed on fishing in our waters. Then the next priority is the possibility of enforcing the rules. We need to set up a 24-hour patrol, but we don't have the people or the material for that now." ■

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