

The Obstacles to Fisheries Management in Jamaica

The coastal reef fisheries of Jamaica are known to be at that stage in their development where the resources are overfished and in need of management. There are too many fishermen chasing too few fish. Although the fishing effort doubled between 1986 and 1981 the total catch of fish remained at approximately 7,000 t/year. The value of the catch has been declining because of changes in the species composition of the fish; the proportion of high-value species has gone down.

Since the late 1960s several fisheries scientists have studied the fisheries and formulated recommendations for their management. The vast majority of these management recommendations have never been implemented although they appear to be quite appropriate. Policy-makers continue to make management decisions based on ill-conceived assumptions regarding the status and potential of the fish resources than on the advice available from stock assessment research. In the meantime the catch rates and the value of the catch continue to decline and the socioeconomic conditions of the fishermen and their families continue to get worse.

This apparent lack of confidence in the advice of the fisheries scientists and the consequent failure to implement fisheries management plans do not appear to be unique to Jamaica; in fact, they seem to be quite common amongst developing countries. Some of the major factors that have contributed to this situation in Jamaica are considered below.

Management Expertise

In Jamaica, the Ministry of Agriculture has overall responsibility for fisheries development and management. The Fisheries Division, which is responsible for marine fisheries development and management, is a relatively small unit within the Production/Extension Department of the Ministry and has very little autonomy. Even the day-to-day operating decisions are made outside the Division.

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Bar jack, *Caranx ruber* (Carangidae) and white grunt, *Haemulon plumieri* (Pomadasyidae) in Nassau fish market. Photo by J.L. Munro.

The top policymakers in the Ministry usually have an agricultural background which is not appropriate for an understanding of the fundamental concepts of fish population dynamics and fishery management. Furthermore, they are usually so busy with their efforts to tap the vast potential of the underdeveloped agricultural sector that they do not have time to attempt an understanding of these concepts.

The whole Ministry of Agriculture is geared for and is emphasizing growth and development. This is good for agriculture, but the marine fisheries have already passed this stage and are now overdeveloped.

The consequences of this scenario are far reaching. The marine fisheries subsector enjoys a low priority rating and is treated with scant regard.

Infrastructure

There is no organization in Jamaica that is structured and equipped to collect, analyze and interpret the data (biological, economic and social) to make and implement the necessary strategic fisheries management decisions and to evaluate their effectiveness. Although the Fisheries Division is responsible for fisheries development and management it has neither the resources, qualified personnel, nor the organizational structure needed to carry out these functions. Rather, its primary function now seems to be the provision of supplies (e.g., fuel) to fishermen. There is a general lack of support to the Division to the extent that several qualified persons have been forced to seek employment in other fields.

The fisheries management plans that have been prepared are nearly all based on scant biological and statistical data on the fisheries. Very little consideration has been given to social and economic issues. Reliable statistical data on total catch from the fisheries are available for only three years, 1968, 1973 and 1981, while data on the cost structure and profitability of fishing operations and the socioeconomic conditions of fishing communities are not available.

As in many other countries, elected policymakers are reluctant to make decisions that may be unpopular and yield significant beneficial results only in the long run.

Finally, as a people we do not seem to recognize the present and potential contribution of the coastal fisheries to the national nutritional, social and economic goals of Jamaica. The Government of Jamaica needs to review its strategies and policies concerning the coastal fisheries to optimize the benefits from the resources while ensuring their future. ●

Much of the earlier work and recommendations on management referred to in this article are contained in the volume: *Caribbean Coral Reef Fishery Resources* by John L. Munro, ICLARM Studies and Reviews 7, 276 p. (1983). This book reproduces a series of 18 reports of Jamaican reef fisheries research together with a summary of progress up to the early 1980s. Ed.