

Blue (In)justice in Turks and Caicos Islands



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The fishing industry in the Turks and Caicos Islands (TCI) is based on a multi-species, multi-gear approach. However, the main focus of the fisheries is spiny lobster and queen conch, for export (US market). There is also a smaller local market for reef fishes, turtle, and crab. Reef fishes were not specifically targeted until 1990s when demand from tourism grew. Currently, with the conch and lobster fisheries in decline and the expanding tourism industry, the market for reef fishes is growing.

Every Turks and Caicos Islander has the right to fish to feed his/her family, but a commercial fishing license is required to fish for profit. There are about 250 fishers in TCI and fishing is carried out from small vessels (<6 m) with outboard engines (<100HP) with a crew of two divers and one driver. Only about 120 of these fishers could be considered full-time, while the rest fish opportunistically, particularly focusing on the start of the spiny lobster season. Seafood processing plants dominate the industry. They dictate the ex-vessel price and species targeted, and they are primarily interested in export rather than supplying the local market. In addition, there is a lack of unity and trust among fishers. Enforcement capacity is limited and mostly focuses on monitoring landings at the processing plants. Due to low resources, the government lacks data to inform management, and the capacity to act strategically.

Location:
Turks and Caicos Islands

Ecosystem type:
Marine

Main gear:
Gillnet, hook & line, recreational gear, seine net, trap, hawaian sling and spear gun, lobster hook

Target species:
Spiny lobster and queen conch, reef fishes, turtle, bonefish, sharks, crab

Vessel type:
small vessels (<6 m)

No. of small-scale fishing vessels:
200

No. of small-scale fishers:
250



All MPAs overlap with traditional fishing areas. The establishment of a large Ramsar Site off North and Middle Caicos effectively turned the traditional fishers into poachers with limited options to fish elsewhere without substantial investment in gear and/or vessels.



Justice in context

Types of justice:

- **Distributive**
- **Social**
- **Economic**
- **Market**
- Infrastructure/wellbeing
- **Regulatory**
- **Procedural**
- Environmental
- COVID-19 related

Access to fishing areas restricted through MPAs: under the TCI National Parks Ordinance, multiple no take MPAs were implemented. In addition, a 'lobster and conch reserve was established under the Fisheries Protection Ordinance. All MPAs overlap with traditional fishing areas. The establishment of a large Ramsar Site off North and Middle Caicos effectively turned the traditional fishers into poachers with limited options to fish elsewhere without substantial investment in gear and/or vessels.

Enforcement agencies disproportionately target fisherfolk who can least afford, and corruption is widespread, whereas, the well-organized, well-financed, industrial poaching operations that work out of neighboring countries are largely left unaddressed. In addition, enforcement officers are paid too little for decent livelihoods but have power to arrest, charge, and take fishers to court. Inevitably, this leads to corrupt practices, and enforcement officers leverage bribes from fisherfolk in order to waive offences, both real, and fabricated.

Many fisherfolk are indentured labourers and cannot seek other markets: almost all of the workers are immigrants (mostly Haitians) and they allowed to work only for the entity which secured their work permit. They are typically paid by how much product they process which means that during closed seasons they do not have income and cannot access other legal employment. In many cases, immigrant employee are required to pay off expenses that employers should cover (e.g., flights, work permit). Additionally, TC Islander fisherfolk get trapped in cycles of debt over gear that they are forced to sell during closed fishing seasons and buy for unfavourable exchange during fishing season.

Definition of small-scale fisheries

Small-scale fisheries are not defined.

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Fisherfolk have little voice in the governance of their industry or marine resources in general: while there are formal structures such as the Fisheries Advisory Committee, the consultation process, they advocate for, is flawed or ineffective.

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Justice in context (cont'd)

In order to pass yearly inspections to be licensed to fish, required items (e.g., VHF radio, life vests, flares) are often transferred from vessel to vessel. Indebted and immigrant fishers are not in strong positions to demand safer vessels from which to work.

Social issues among fisherfolk are neglected: a high proportion of fishers regularly abuse drugs and alcohol and many are problem gamblers and thus they are often viewed as a lower social class. Fisherfolk have little voice in the governance of their industry or marine resources in general: while there are formal structures such as the Fisheries Advisory Committee, the consultation process, they advocate for, is flawed or ineffective. Fisherfolk are readily ignored and stigmatized because of the social issues listed above, because they are often viewed as a lower social class (particularly in comparison to tourist business people or developers), because of the predominance of people from Haiti who are discriminated against in the TCI, and because of the lower levels of education and literacy among fisherfolk. Typically, fisherfolk do not move in the same social circles as decision makers; fisherfolk, cannot express their views in writing as effectively as other groups; and fisherfolk do not have legal representation readily available to address their arguments more formally. Consequently, their voices are drowned out by foreign investors and business people.

Dealing with justice

To date, nothing has been done to resolve these injustices.

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