



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

January 19, 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 engage in the marine and coastal Project Finance for Permanence Initiative. 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.”<sup>1</sup> Findings shared and discussions facilitated by the Belize Fisheries Project provide further insights into supporting sustainable fisheries and livelihoods in Belize, and contributing to the well-being of coastal communities.

The Belize Fisheries Project brings together experts from Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI), the Environmental Law Institute (ELI), Healthy Reefs for Healthy People Initiative (HRI), MRAG Americas, and The Sea Around Us (SAU)/University of British Columbia, as well as an individual fisheries scientist with specific experience in Belize’s fisheries and the wider region. 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>.

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<sup>1</sup> 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 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 with the fishers in different parts of the country. Building on the information discussed during the June workshops, the team shared its projections of stock status under a range of future levels of fishing (status quo and different levels of catch reduction) and provided an overview of management approaches 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 BFP 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 key 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> 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 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,<sup>3</sup> 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?

### Commonalities from All Three Workshops

The following provides a brief overview of main points of discussion and agreement heard from fishers during the three workshops. Additional information will be provided in the final report.

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 have observed in the fisheries. These include the catch and sale of undersized and out-of-season products, 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, 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. Some of the same management measures were mentioned at every table. Namely, fishers highlighted the need to improve enforcement and reform the licensing system. 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 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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/>

license audit to remove old or duplicated licenses, 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. Fishers also raised other ideas. They frequently mentioned extending closed seasons, increasing minimum catch sizes for conch and lobster, and implementing science-based quotas. Banning hook sticks for catching lobster was also commonly mentioned, particularly at the workshops in Stann Creek and Belize City, although there was less agreement on this measure among fishers at the workshop in Corozal.

At each workshop, 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 transition they would need. Some fishers expressed interest in alternative livelihoods (including agriculture, aquaculture, and animal husbandry), further education, and additional certifications. 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 in 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 payoffs to rangers to fish within marine reserves, lack of general patrols to prevent wrongdoing, significant take of catch by tourist operators, and other issues. One tangible solution fishers frequently mentioned was to increase the salaries of the rangers in the marine areas, which fishers felt would help to reduce the incentive to accept bribes.

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 management actions that fishers could take to the government and NGOs in order to advocate for the changes fishers seek.

## 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 information about stock assessment findings and stock projections under different management scenarios, and will continue conversations with those we met on this trip. 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 assessment modeling tool. We encourage all interested stakeholders to engage with us in the training and subsequent dialogues about the state of fisheries in Belize and potential management options. We look forward to hearing from you.

Estamos traduciendo este informe preliminar a Español. Compartiremos el reporte traducido una vez esté disponible.