
What's there to refute???

General › What's there to refute???



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Photo: Dale Fairweather, Belizean Fisherman

Belize fishers support and confirm Amandala articles on the state of the fisheries. “Sometimes the answers that scientific evidence provides aren’t convenient or easy to hear, but I think we can all agree they are important in order to move forward,” Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, a Belize Fisheries Project team member said.

by Marco Lopez

BELIZE CITY, Thurs. Feb. 15, 2024

The fisherfolk of Belize continue to call for changes. Yesterday, the Ministry of the Blue Economy and Civil Aviation (MBECA) released a statement “refuting” the headline story titled, “Belizean fishers demand changes!”, in last Friday’s issue of the Amandala.

The MBECA is in effect refuting the everyday experience of fisherfolk on the Belizean waters, and empirical data analysis compiled by the highly experienced team from the Summit Foundation, Sea Around Us, Healthy Reefs For Healthy People, and other project partners and local fisherfolk who are members of the Belize Federation of Fishers (BFF).

A release issued by the BFF today notes, “The Belize Federation of Fishers (BFF) unequivocally stands by said *Amandala* article of the National Fishery being in crisis because in a word it is the PLAIN TRUTH!”

The Blue Economy ministry, in its release, refers to “recent stock assessments” which “have confirmed high and consistent annual recruitment rates into the fisheries, well-defined population structures, and sustained catch levels over time series”, but they have failed to furnish those alleged assessments or point to where the data is published despite multiple requests.

“I found the Ministry of Blue Economies response fairly rich in rhetoric but very low in terms of addressing the central issue. The central issue is whether or not the science that has been promulgated, and has been released, and that has been discussed, by the Summit Foundation and the BFF – whether that science is valid or not; and indeed if it is not valid, what is it that the Ministry of Blue Economy would be narrating in terms of where it falls short,” George Myvett, Technical Director at the BFF, said during an interview with the Amandala today.

Myvett sees the release as disappointing, noting that what is supposed to be a technical institution is making itself out to be political.

Amandala spoke to Dr. Andrew Rosenberg, a team member from the Sea Around Us initiative and Belize Fisheries Project who was present in Belize for the June and December 2023 workshops, today as well.

In response to the release from the MBECA, he shared, “Our scientific work and engagement with fishermen, NGOs and the government in Belize is intended to support the Blue Economy effort and strengthen the sustainability of Belizean fisheries, your wonderful marine environment and a Blue Economy.”

Rosenberg added, “In order to do that we did our scientific, policy, and community engagement work to provide additional bases for policy action. Sometimes the answers that scientific evidence provides aren’t convenient or easy to hear, but I think we can all agree they are important in order to move forward.”

He shared that the data, methods, and all the results from the assessment they conducted are “fully and openly available to anyone.”

He commented, “We have met with and continue to offer to work with the Fisheries Department and other government agencies as well as NGOs and fishers. And we are willing to utilize any additional data and information that can improve our collective understanding of Belizean fisheries and marine conservation.”

Nigel Martinez, Executive Director of the BFF, said during today's interview that the authorities are aware of the threats the Belizean fisheries face. He said the “dismissive tone” of the Blue Economy's ministry press release fails to accept the experiences of the fishers on the ground, and the corroborating empirical data analyzed by the international partners.

Life-long fisherman, Dale Fairweather said categorically that 2023 has been the worst fishing year he has ever experienced. Today, with less than one month to the end of the lobster season, the harvester is only catching 10 lobsters a day – a truly dismal number, eating away at his bottom line.

“Summit people have been working with Fisheries before they started working with BFF, so I don't see why it is a problem for them to work with them now. So, because they are saying something that the Fisheries Department does not like? But it's not them that's saying it, it's the fisheries that are telling the Summit this is happening,” Fairweather pointed out.

The data presented from the two workshops held in 2023 were called “misinformation” by the MBECA, claiming that scientific data over the past 30 years “have confirmed the long-term sustainability of Belize's shallow water fisheries.”

This, however, is not reflective of the desire of more and more fisherfolk to venture into deep sea fishing, and is “a complete lie,” according to Martinez.

“In their press release, they had mentioned that they have scientific data for the past 30 years, and from that data, they are saying that we have consistent, sustainable, shallow water fisheries, and that is a complete lie. The fishers have stated categorically that our shallow reef is under severe pressure, hence the reason they want to venture into the deep sea,” Martinez pointed out.

He added, "You know this whole back and forth started because we are saying that there is consistent depletion across the fisheries. Now, if they have done a recent stock assessment, why is it that no one has seen this stock assessment that they have done?"

Wayne Whittaker, a Belize City-based fisherman backed the remarks of the other members of the BFF. He shared, "Fishing is getting slower and slower."

"You have to go much farther now; your expense is much more because of the price of gasoline; it's taking a toll on us. Every fisherman I talk to, dehn da like, 'bwai what we wahn do next?', because it's just getting slower," Whittaker said.

He said that the lack of enforcement on the waters is a major contributor to the state of the industry.

"Show us! You barely see Fisheries Department out there. Where you do see them, it's just like a waste of time," he said.

Fairweather said that Belize has a lot of good regulations in place, but agreed that lack of enforcement is a major shortfall.

"We have a lot of very good regulations. I'm not going to knock that; we have very good regulations. But the problem out at sea is that there is no enforcement, because the government does not have money to have patrols out there, so there is no enforcement. So, what's the use of having all these regulations on paper, but nobody to enforce them; so the fishermen do weh they want," Fairweather said.

The members of the BFF shared that they are simply calling the Fisheries Department and Ministry of the Blue Economy to bring them to the table to engage in inclusive, and solution-oriented dialogue with all partners, local and international, working to safeguard our Fisheries and Blue Economy.