

*The View from Europe*  
*By David Jessop*

## New focus on maritime industries required

Stretching 200 miles offshore, the Exclusive Economic Zones of most Caribbean nations cover areas of ocean vastly larger than the land masses to which they belong. Despite this, the maritime sector has never had much in the way of encouragement or investment; leaving those who farm or use the sea often feeling neglected when it comes to understanding or decision making.

Why this should be is worthy of broader debate, but it appears to begin with the unfortunate view in much of the region that fishing is, and always will be destined to be a subsistence or artisanal activity, undertaken by the least organised and poorest in society.

This is despite the region being amongst the largest per capita consumers of fish in the world, hundreds of thousands of visitors wanting to eat fish fresh from the seas that they vacation beside, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) having designated the broader region as one of the world's major fishing grounds.

In the last week, a boost for developing joined up thinking on this issue has come from a Caribbean nation seemingly among those least likely to recognise the potential that the Caribbean has in the seas that surround it.

As a part of the United States Virgin Islands struggle to deliver its extensive social commitments and pursue economic growth, its administration has begun to look at what more it might be doing to encourage development in areas that are not traditional.

To this end, the island's Governor, John de Jongh, has created a Council to advise him and his administration on growing the economic base of the USVI's maritime industries that in part develops its fisheries, while finding sensitive ways to better utilise its marine environment.

In order to achieve this, the USVI is first intending looking at economic and regulatory obstacles and then at developing a joined up approach to marine issues that includes diving, charter yachting, fisheries, marine education, marine manufacturing, marina operations, and sports and game fishing. It will also look too at ways in which employment opportunities might be created in maritime industries.

This development coincides with a drive by the Belize based Caribbean Regional Fisheries Mechanism (CRFM) to create a better awareness of maritime opportunity across the rest of the region with support from an unusual mix of external donors that believe that fisheries and the marine environment offers a so far unrealised new frontier in regional development.

Trying to understand the nature of the Caribbean marine sector is, however, far from easy, as up to date regional statistics are not easy to come by.

Various academic and industry sources suggest that the fisheries sector in the region employs about 182,000 fisherfolk and ancillary workers; makes a contribution to regional GDP of between close to seven per cent in the case of Guyana, to less than one per cent elsewhere; had in 2006 a value of US\$600m; and has exported in recent years fish and fish products worth US\$150m, although some

figures suggest that exports including those from aquaculture could be as high as US\$250m per annum.

Studies by the University of the West Indies (UWI) note that although the industry is for the most part subsistence based, commercial vessels and, to a much smaller extent industrial fleets, operate out of Cuba, Jamaica, Guyana, Suriname and Belize.

What the statistics also show is that most Caribbean islands are net importers of fish, in some cases by large margins, contributing – many would say unnecessarily – to the region's overall US\$343m import bill for fish and fish products.

This suggests that the region is in the paradoxical situation of not being able to meet its own domestic requirements for fish, importing most of the fish it supplies to visitors, and not taking advantage of the preferential arrangements it has had for decades to access markets in Europe or North America, while being surrounded by seas that are replete with nutrition and economic opportunity.

That said, as with most Caribbean industries the challenges facing the fisheries sector are legion.

At the policy end, changes in the international law of the sea some years ago extended nations' economic jurisdictions into areas once regarded as being international waters, potentially excluding fisherfolk from traditional fishing grounds.

The effect, in part, was to slow progress towards a CARICOM common fisheries regime that was intended to establish a common economic zone without affecting national economic boundaries, while finding equitable ways to balance the needs of traditional fishing communities, conservation, licensing arrangements, ecosystems and the position of third nations fishing in Caribbean waters.

To complicate matters further, most of the independent Caribbean has still to conclude bilateral treaties delimiting their maritime boundaries with their neighbours, in part because of concerns about unexploited energy reserves that might lie beneath the sea bed, but also for technical and resource reasons.

Other smaller but just as difficult to resolve practical issues exist for the sector.

It is an industry that is hard to attract young people into; national fisheries departments are inadequately resourced; invasive species are creating problems for local fish stocks, most notably the Pacific lion fish; climate change and climate variability are effecting marine ecosystems; the industry's largely artisanal nature makes it not well placed to communicate or advocate its needs; there is a general lack of awareness of the new opportunities in aquaculture, recreational fishing and conservation that are available; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing continues; maritime zones cannot be effectively policed; and there is a need to improve fish and seafood standards for the domestic and export markets.

Despite this, as the CRFM's executive director, Milton Haughton, and the organisation's outgoing Chairman Michael Branyen, pointed out recently to the Barbados Advocate, fisheries need to be used to create gainful employment in ways that go beyond the traditional view.

They made clear that the sector also offers opportunities in, for instance, the land based production of ornamental fish for export; growing fish, seaweed and other marine organisms in the sea;

recreational fishing linked to tourism; in food processing and manufacturing; and in conservation of the marine environment.

Fisheries in their broadest sense offer a significant and unrealised economic opportunity for the Caribbean and some of the poorest in society. For this reason greater focus on the sector on the part of national policy makers is long overdue.

David Jessop is the Director of the Caribbean Council and can be contacted at

[david.jessop@caribbean-council.org](mailto:david.jessop@caribbean-council.org)

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