

Martin Reyes, Fisherman from Punta Gorda, Belize



Like many other long time fishermen in Punta Gorda, Belize, Martin Reyes has personally experienced the fortunes, good and bad, of the fishing industry. In recent years, more and more people have poured into the fishing industry, and Martin has had to work harder and harder to make a living from fishing. Martin described the condition of the fishermen in the area as “just surviving”.

Fifty years ago, fishermen waded in shallow waters here to harvest spiny lobster and queen conch by the hundreds. "I used to get 200 pounds of lobster in a day's work, but now fishermen think ten pounds are good," recalls Martin Reyes, who has fished off Punta Gorda in southern Belize for 45 years.

When the country's sugarcane and citrus industry founder, people desperate for work increasingly turning to fishing.

Lobster and conch face a threat of overfishing, despite the fact that there were very strict limits on what gear fishermen could use and areas of the ocean were closed to fishing through the establishment of marine protected areas. It became increasingly harder and harder for Martin and other fishermen to make a living from Port Honduras, his traditional fishing grounds. It was hard for him to see a future for the Port Honduras fishery or a reason to get involved in protecting it.

It became clear that a new approach was needed to revive the health of the fisheries and also bring some relief to struggling fishermen and the coastal economy.

The process of implementing catch shares in Port Honduras began in 2011. EDF and its partners worked with the Government of Belize to transform Port Honduras into a fishing area with access allowed for traditional fishermen who are taking care of it to ensure the fisheries are preserved for future generations. This is a form of catch shares called territorial user rights for fishermen (TURFs) and they work by allocating fishermen licenses that give access to an exclusive fishing area.

Martin's-- and other Port Honduras fishermen's—motivations shifted dramatically with their new licenses. They now see that it's within their interest to protect their designated fishing grounds and the marine protected areas from outsiders. They're realizing the direct benefits from conservation improvements.

Martin is no longer “just surviving.” In fact, he is a leader in the community and helps oversee the catch share program. When Reyes identifies a poacher, he alerts rangers by cellphone. Since the Belizean government has little money for monitoring and enforcement, the role of fishermen is essential.

Out on the water, Reyes talks to fellow fishermen to make sure they haven't kept undersized lobsters or females about to lay eggs, and under the new catch shares program he is encouraging all fishermen to submit their catch data to managers.

He explained why their participation is important – the data helps scientists and managers to manage the fishery properly. His outreach worked, and fishermen are now filling out their daily catch records. In another sign of success of the program, Martin and many of his friends are now helping to enforce the closed areas and are even advocating for expansion.

And Martin's efforts are representative of a larger change in the involvement of fishermen since the beginning of catch shares. At the beginning of the project in Belize, there were barely enough fishermen engaged to fill the seats of a small conference room table. Today meetings with fishermen must be held in the large meeting hall at the local parish to accommodate the nearly 100 fisherman usually that participate.

Traditional small-scale fishermen like Martin Reyes from Port Honduras (above) have used small skiffs for handline fishing for generations.