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Research for Planned Change Among Small-  
scale Fishermen in the Gulf of Nicoya  
Costa Rica: Some Preliminary Results

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Research for Planned Change among Small-scale Fishermen in the  
Gulf of Nicoya, Costa Rica: Some Preliminary Results<sup>1</sup>

by

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PURPOSE An important and perhaps crucial aspect of programs involving research and planned change among small-scale fishermen is the fisherman himself. The most carefully constructed programs--programs in which great care and skill have been applied to the biological and economic aspects--will fail if they are not understood or accepted by the fishermen. Attitudes, beliefs, and values of the fishermen toward the industry, toward planned changes, and toward research programs are therefore an important aspect of any research and development program.

The anthropologist's role in the University of Rhode Island Project was to provide data linking the fishermen to other aspects of the ongoing research and provide information indicating where prevailing attitudes, beliefs, and values of fishermen could either impede or facilitate the research and development program.

DATA COLLECTION The fisherman himself is often a crucial link in obtaining data about the small-scale fishery. He is often the only person who can supply certain information since much of his work is conducted away from shore and not easily observed. This separation from land-based society has given the fisherman a world-wide reputation for secrecy and deception. The

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<sup>1</sup>The substance of this paper was first presented as part of a seminar held at the Ministerio de Agricultura y Ganaderia, San Jose, Costa Rica, November 18, 1976.

fisherman's cooperation in providing data is therefore essential. It was therefore necessary to determine the attitudes, beliefs, and values that fishermen held concerning some of the questions that our project was asking them. Attention was focused on the economic questionnaire since data concerning income is often the most difficult to elicit.

Experience indicated that the most effective situation for obtaining attitudes of fishermen toward the research we were conducting was in small, natural interacting groups--small groups of fishermen who had gathered to discuss football games, women, etc. In such small groups fishermen feel they have support of companions and are more likely to speak their minds. When spoken to individually, fishermen are likely to acquiesce to what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

The anthropologist and his research assistant were rather familiar faces among the fishermen, and they could enter such groups and gradually turn the conversation around to the economic and biological research which was being conducted. They asked the fishermen what they thought about the economic questions, and invariably they said that they didn't like them. They said they were afraid that the information was going to be used for (1) taxes; (2) to close the gulf or areas of the gulf to fishing; and (3) to prohibit the use of nets in the gulf. When asked if anyone told them why the data was being gathered, they said no. After being told the potential benefits of the research program, the attitude of the entire group changed. The fishermen said that since they were afraid the data was to be used against them, they did not always tell the truth when responding to questions. Their admitting the fact that they had lied indicated that our interviewing technique along with a full explanation of the purpose of

the data gathering was an important element in gaining their cooperation. The fishermen themselves even went on to suggest that we should find some way of informing all the fishermen of the potential benefits of the research. They said they had simply been questioned with little or no explanation, and that they were reluctant to cooperate in research they didn't understand.

The inspectors who had been interviewing the fishermen were also interviewed, and it was discovered that they had a limited understanding of the potential uses of the data. After being read a list of potential uses of the data they said they wished that they had known them beforehand. They went on to say that when fishermen would press them for an explanation they would fabricate some sort of reason, not knowing if it were true or false.

With regard to both fishermen and inspectors it was determined that they had no problems understanding various goals of the research. This indicates that full explanations of programs should be provided to fishermen and all inspectors.

Recommendations Interviews have indicated that fishermen have misunderstood past research as well as present research. Many fishermen are still complaining about promises made during the FAO-BID research which have not been fulfilled. Many of these expectations are the result of rumors and misunderstandings which could be corrected by improved communication with fishermen. The following recommendations are therefore proposed:

1. That inspectors and extension workers be fully informed of goals, timetables, and problems involved with ongoing programs so that they can inform the fishermen.

2. That extension workers and inspectors report potentially harmful rumors back to their superiors so that correct information can be communicated

to the fishermen.

3. That the Ministry of Agriculture attempt to obtain a small portion of radio time and newspaper space to periodically inform fishermen of the progress of ongoing development programs, to counteract rumors, and to transmit general information. This information should appear regularly so that fishermen can expect it. Almost all fishermen listen to the radio, and most of them take radios out in their boats. In Puntarenas almost all literate fishermen read newspapers. Extension workers could take copies of newspapers which contain fishermen's columns to remote areas and literate fishermen could spread information through the community. Both newspapers and the radio add greatly to the credibility of information and should be used where possible. Their use would help counteract harmful rumors and provide accurate information to fishermen which could increase their willingness to cooperate with government programs.

THE FISHERMAN AND CHANGE Turning next to the importance of the attitudes and beliefs of fishermen with respect to planned changes, in this brief, preliminary report we will only examine several aspects of the data collected. A full analysis of the data will be included in future reports.

Turning first to the most frequently attacked institution in the small-scale fishing industry, we shall examine some aspects of middlemen. In many development plans attempts to eliminate middlemen have failed. Why have these attempts failed when outside experts and in-country non-fishermen often claim that middlemen exploit the fisherman? There of course might be true in some cases, but why not determine the fishermen's perceptions of middlemen before tampering with existing institutions. There are many middlemen in the Gulf of Nicoya, and we asked fishermen why they chose one

over another. Their answers were very revealing and must be taken into account in any plans to replace traditional middlemen with some other type of institution. For example fishermen said that they choose one middleman over another because of 1) provision of loans; 2) repayment of loans adjusted to variation in income; 3) immediate payment for fish; 4) proximity to dwelling place; 5) friendship; 6) honesty; 7) security of prices; 8) price paid for fish; 9) how the buyer helps them, e.g. picking up boat parts in San Jose, etc. Proposed institutions which do not provide these functions might fail, and the only way we can learn about these important functions is by asking fishermen the proper questions.

Turning next to the accounting system which the University of Rhode Island Project and the Regional Office have introduced to the fishermen, we find that most fishermen think that such a system is useful. Nevertheless, some fishermen resist using such a system. Why? We asked fishermen the disadvantages of using such a system and among the answers we found that they felt that the data might be used for taxes; that the fishermen were too tired after fishing to record such data; that they felt that they did not have sufficient time; and that they felt that they made so little money that it would not be worth the effort. Knowledge of why fishermen reject such an innovation can be used to construct programs to more effectively introduce and modify the innovation. For example, information programs could be developed to convince the fishermen that the data will not be used for taxation purposes, or the forms could be changed so that they take less of the fisherman's time. Perhaps they have erroneous perceptions of the amount of time the recording of such data takes and these erroneous perceptions could be corrected.

The previous examples are concerned with only a small portion of the sociocultural data collected in conjunction with the University of Rhode Island Project. Nevertheless, they should serve to indicate the importance of the attitudes, beliefs, and values of fishermen in the development process. Planned change programs should always take these attitudes, beliefs, and values into consideration. The fisherman has adapted to his ecological niche with a complex sociocultural and technological system, and he often has more knowledge of this system than experts who attempt to impose changes without complete knowledge of the ongoing system. In fact, the so-called expert who fails to understand the ongoing system hazards being considered is not accepted by the fisherman, thus losing credibility.

Recommendations Any program of planned change must be based on a complete knowledge of how elements undergoing change function in the existing sociocultural system. Efforts should be made to involve sociologists and anthropologists of the University of Costa Rica in the design of needed research programs.