

Garifunas in Honduras: The invisible Fishers and Fish processors

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Abstract

The Garifuna are an ethnic group descended from African slaves who were brought from what is today Nigeria to the American continent. They managed to escape to the island of San Vincent in the year 1635, where they mixed with indigenous Caribbean populations. From the Caribbean island they moved to Central America, and now there are some 600 000 people who identify themselves with the Garifuna tribe, living scattered in Honduras, Belize, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and the United States. Garifuna speak English, Spanish and the Garifuna language. Having been moved to Honduras by British authorities in 1802, their residence there dates back more than 200 years. The present study was conducted in various villages of Honduras in the Bay of Tela. The port of Tela is surrounded by Garifuna communities, several nature reserves, and the Los Micos lagoon. The living environment is a purely tropical area, and fish is the basic ingredient in Garifuna nutrition. In addition, fishing is one of the few means of income. Living in an area of huge tourism potential and development, these communities are often displaced by tourism's growth. On the other hand, the Honduran State refuses to recognize the Garifuna as indigenous people, thus denying them the right to land and access to their traditional fish resources. Female fish processors who, since ancient times were processing the fish on the beach, are removed from their sites without financial reimbursement. Garifuna argue that they suffer from significant cultural loss through the presence of tourists and that their culture is marketed by other intermediaries. Corporations and landowners are moving forward with monocultures of oil palm, threatening food sovereignty. The proliferation of agro-industrial, hydropower and mining, and tourism projects - in addition to the presence of drug trafficking and organized crime - already caused the disappearance of some communities. This is attacking the survival of the Garifuna communities.

Keywords: Garifuna; female fish processors, right to land, right to landing sites, conflicts with the tourist industry, conflicts with other ethnic groups

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Description of the fishery

Garifuna fishers (mainly men) in the Bay of Tela catch demersal species (mainly snapper), mackerel and crab. Fishing is carried out almost every day in the marine areas of the Bay of Tela, but also in the Los Micos lagoon and adjacent areas.

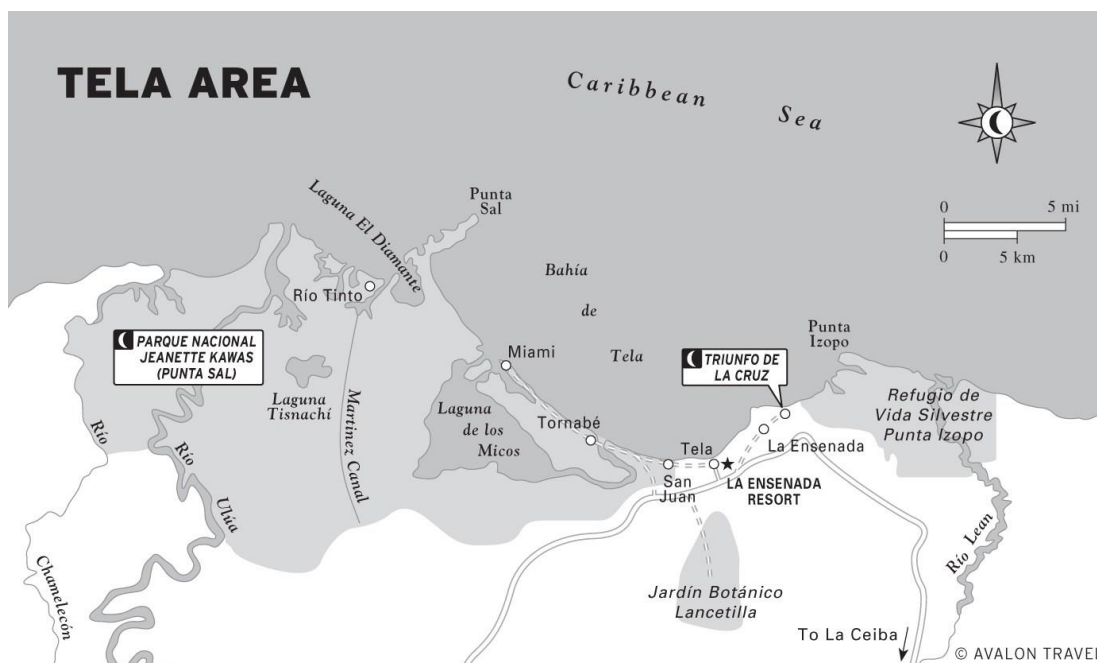


Figure 1. Bay of Tela, with the main Garifuna fishing communities in Miami, Tornabé, and Triunfo de la Cruz.

Source: AVALON TRAVEL.

Fishing gears used are gillnet, trammel nets, traps (for the crab fishers), as well as hand lines and harpoons. Garifuna women play a fundamental role in marketing and in the preparation of products. This serves as the fundamental basis for family support.

1.2 Economic contribution and social implications of the fishing activity

Garifuna society is a matriarchate, where women are running the family. In the Bay of Tela area, the main activity of the women is fish processing - salting, drying and smoking, in line with the traditional African products. These products, together with some fresh fish, are sold at the Tela communal market. The income from sales is practically the only income for the families. The traditional processing areas, as well as the traditional landing sites, are in an area being taken over by the development of tourism, forcing out the Garifuna settlers.

The economic contribution of fishing activities carried out by the Garifuna is the fundamental basis for the survival of this group. Apart from representing a primary source of income, fish and fish products are one of the main protein sources for the members of the Garifuna living around the Bay of Tela. In this context, the source of food and income are closely linked to the tenure of lands, ancestrally occupied on the coastal fringes and, in the light of the tourist start-ups, agriculture is increasingly put at risk.

2. MANAGEMENT OF THE FISHERY AND RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

2.1 Management of the fishery

Overfishing in the maritime areas and the Los Micos lagoon puts at risk the survival of this fishery and consequently, the future of these communities. Overall, the management system does not seem to be very efficient, and overexploitation of the main species is a reality.

Several public and private institutions are involved in the management of resources, which is of extreme complexity, but the role of the Garifuna fishers is not recognized by the authorities.

In addition, there are conflicts with resident fishers in the lagoon, descendants of the Spaniards (called Latinos). The Los Micos lagoon is under co-management by the resident fishing communities. However in assigning the fishing rights, the State and the regional fisheries authority considered only the resident fishers on the coast of the lagoon, while the Garifuna fishers, mainly resident in Miami (the marine tip of the lagoon), were not considered in fishing rights / co-management arrangements. This is despite the fact that they have been fishing the lagoon resources since ancient times.

2.2 Brief history of former rights-based approaches used in the fishery

The fisheries in the marine areas of the Bay of Tela are open access in nature, while the Los Micos lagoon is managed by the authorities and the local Latinos communities. In the lagoon fisheries, the Garifuna community are not considered as residents, and are therefore excluded from the fishing rights.

2.3 Rights-based approach: allocation and characteristics

Garifuna communities are not considered rights owners, either for the fishery resources or for the land at the landing sites, where the communities have been residents for decades if not centuries. Tourist developments eliminate the possibility of fishers to access their traditional fishing areas, while the women lose their traditional places of fish drying, not to talk about the traditional housing of the communities.

3. CONTRIBUTION OF THE RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH TO ACHIEVING SUSTAINABILITY

3.1 Sustainable use of the resources

As mentioned, the lack of a resource management system and absence of effective public policies is notorious, with possibly severe consequences for the fisheries of the region and, more specifically, the fisheries of the Garifuna communities around the Bay of Tela. However, fishing is not only a source of food and money – it is also based on the ancient culture of these people.

3.2 Economic viability of the fishery

Until 1992, with the exception of Trujillo, Garifuna communities had the right to the land where they were resident. In that year, the Honduran Government issued a new law for modernization and development of the agricultural sector, which refuses to recognize their status as Indigenous People and deny their right to land. This decision puts the Garifuna communities into an impossible situation - their economic viability is practically wiped out.

3.3 Social equality

The Garifuna are often marginalized by society, struggling with severely limited access to education and employment. The denial of the right to land has put the Garifuna communities into an unequal situation when comparing them to agricultural people or lagoon fishers of the Latino community. The cultural aspects of the Garifuna fishing communities are jeopardized, as their traditional residential areas are attractive places for tourist developments. In fact, one community has been displaced by a new resort building.

4. MAIN CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

4.1 Challenges for the fishery

The Garifuna fishing tradition is at risk for various reasons:

- Overexploitation of the traditional resources;
- Exclusion from management discussion, as not recognized as stakeholders by the State;
- Displacement by touristic development, including access to the traditional landing sites;
- Displacement of female fish processors from their traditional fish processing places;

- Problems with the quality of fish products, as they have to travel further in order to be sold or processed;
- Loss of culture based on fishing and fish processing; and
- The fault of rights lead the younger generation into crime, drug dealing, and prostitution.

4.2 Improving fishery sustainability in the future

Garifuna communities have to be recognized by the State as rights owners, both to the traditional fishing grounds and to the land areas close to the traditional landing sites. The Garifuna must be included in stakeholder meetings on co-management of the declining fish resources, and they must also become more visible in the governmental discussions.

A special commitment has to be dedicated to the female fish processors of the Garifuna communities around the Bay of Tela. Their rights to process the fish in the areas since ancient times dedicated to this commercial activity are jeopardized. Being women in an overlooked social group, they are even more at risk of losing their traditional rights. In fact, in various coastal places, their fish processing stalls have been replaced by touristic installations. This displacement has an impact also on the quality and health aspects of the fishery product.

4.3 Lessons learned

There are several lessons that are learned from this experience:

- Communities that have been resident at landing sites for a very long time, and who are using the resources, should be considered as indigenous people, and their rights should be recognized.
- The culture of the community, the origin of the community, or the colour of the skin should not be a reason to exclude fishers and fish processors from the right to the resource and the right to land.
- Tourist investments can be attractive, but the right to the land of the resident population and their culture has to be protected.
- Making people become invisible and without rights only helps crime and exploitation.
- In roles overlooking a community, women become even more invisible without rights.

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