

# Guatemala's Fishing Trade Spells Trouble for Belize

- A Reporter Special Feature

An investigation into Guatemala-la's thriving shark fishing industry reveals serious concerns for our country and fisherfolk. In February 2019, a team of investigative journalists from *The Reporter* traveled to southern Belize, then to Guatemala to evaluate the number and scope of sharks, fish and other marine species poached from Belizean waters and exported to Guatemala. Their findings were startling and it was discovered that this issue has deep roots.

In 2007, Dr. Rachel Graham, a renowned shark expert living in Belize, published a research paper entitled *Vulnerability Assessment of Sharks and Rays in Belize: Capture and Trade*. In this study, commissioned by the Wildlife Conservation Society and permitted by the Belize Fisheries Department, Dr. Graham assessed the vulnerability of Belizean sharks and rays related to their export to Guatemala. She notes that "Shark meat is not regularly consumed in Belize" and "Sharks are traditionally captured in Belize and exported as dry salted fillet to neighboring countries," primarily Guatemala.

Dr. Graham's study revealed that most sharks were processed and then exported from seven shark fishing camps extending from southern Belize northward to the fringes of Belize City. She estimated from October 2006 to April 2007, more than 1.7 million pounds of whole shark and nearly 26,000 thousand pounds of dried shark fins were exported from Belize to Guatemala. Dried shark fins alone were estimated to fetch more than \$2.5 million Belize dollars. Dr. Graham concluded in 2007 that "Sharks in Belize are scarce where they were once abundant" and that "Shark resources have declined in the past 10 years and the state of the fishery is poor." She highlighted that "increased demand and fishing pressure from Guatemala combined with

unsustainable fishing gears, such as (gill) nets followed by long lines, are blamed for the decline."

In light of the proposed gillnet ban in Belizean waters, our team of journalists traveled south in February 2019 to better understand this crisis. Fisher-men from Dangriga, Hopkins, Sittee River, Riversdale, Seine Bight, Punta Gorda and Barranco were interviewed, as were fishing industry personnel from Livingston and Puerto Barrios, Guatemala. Their observa-

tions were concerning for the livelihoods of Belizean fishermen, Belize's economy and border relations with our neighbors.

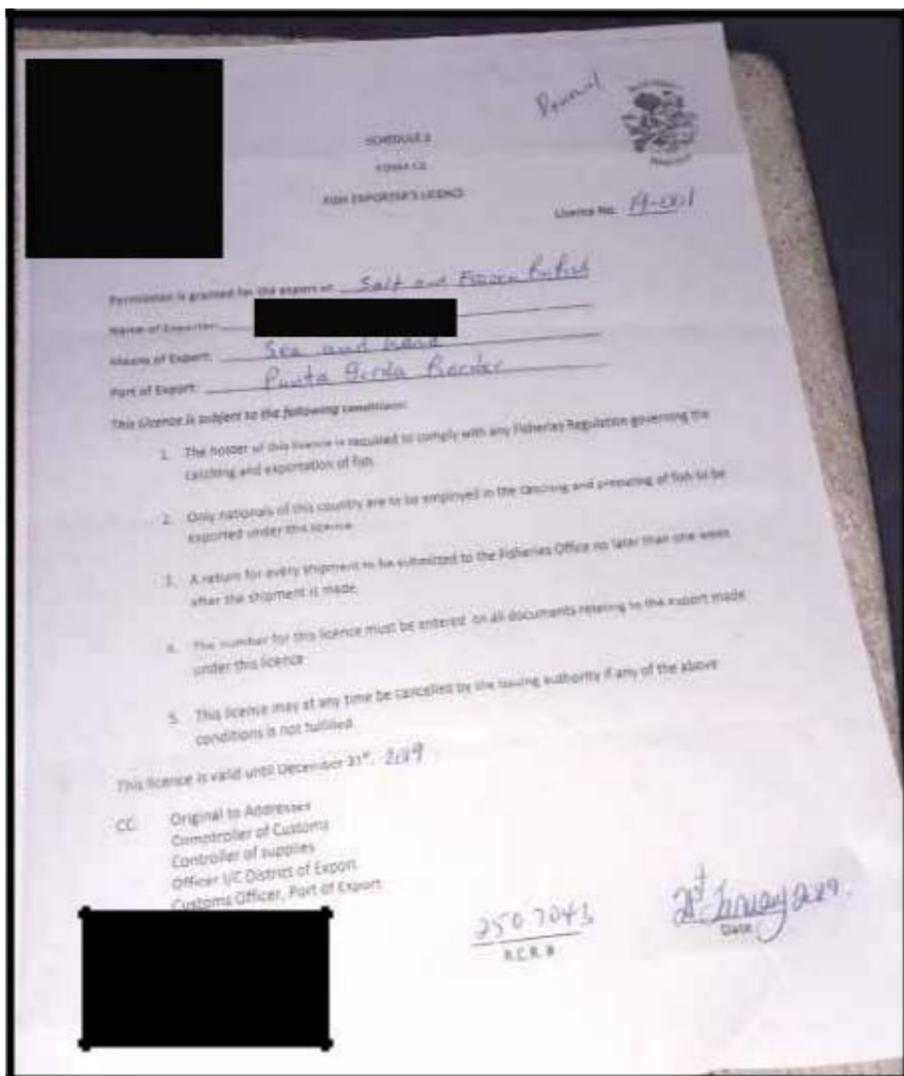
In spite of Dr. Graham's recommendations, now published more than a decade ago, the export of Belizean fish products to Guatemala appears to have expanded significantly. In addition to large quantities of shark meat, shark fins and rays, the illegal harvest, export and sale of Belizean finfish, (including sport fish), conch, shrimp and other marine species to Guatemala is a present-day reality. With a booming market, there's no end in sight.

Fishermen from Sittee River, Seine Bight and Riversdale reported they are aware of at least a half dozen "shark fishing camps" operating in Southern Belize. These are processing centers operated by naturalized Belizeans from Guatemala where sharks and fish are corned (salted) and loaded unto boats to be taken to Guatemala. Belizean fishermen indicate that small boats from these camps carry loads up to 1,000 pounds of shark meat, shark fins and finfish to their home country, while larger boats can carry up to 4,000 pounds per trip. These camps have concentrated on sharks in the past, but with declining shark populations, have diversified to now catch and process vast quantities of finfish.

Sources indicated that fishermen from these camps primarily



Boats leaving Livingston, Guatemala



Belizean Export Permit

fish Belizean waters at night with gillnets and that activity generally starts around 8:00 p.m. and continues until around 4:00 am. Fishermen estimated that over 100,000 pounds of shark meat and finfish are taken out of Belizean waters to Guatemala and Honduras between Christmas and Easter each year. Other sources estimated that the export amount exceeds 200,000 pounds annually. One camp on Coco Solo Caye was recently occupied by the Belize Coast Guard and fish processing was halted.

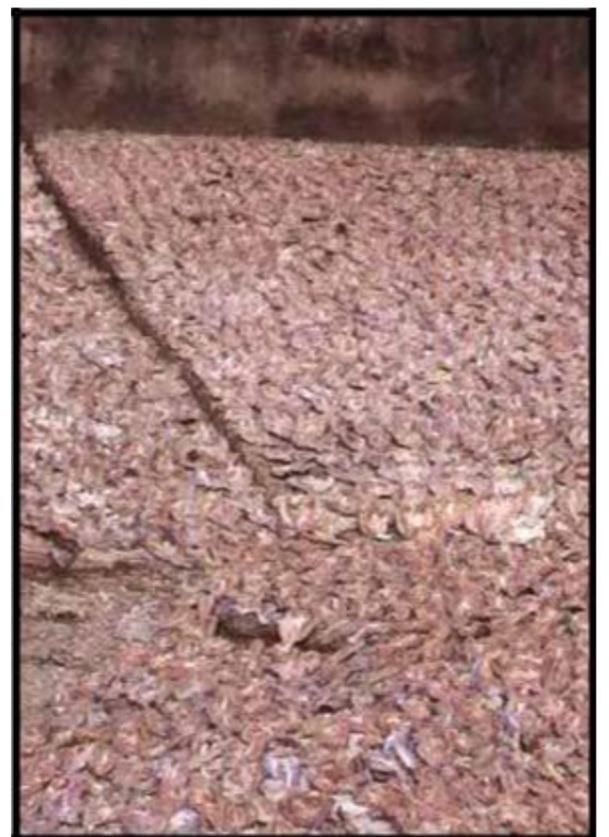
In addition to the semi-permanent fish processing camps,

larger fishing boats from Livingston, Guatemala now regularly fish in Belizean waters. These vessels also fish at night, primarily utilizing large gillnets, some reported by fishermen to be one-mile in length. Several of these vessels were observed leaving Livingston harbor at dusk and arriving back in Livingston around daylight. Individuals receiving the catch from these boats for processing confirmed that it was from Belize. Our sources indicate that these Guatemalan vessels operate as far north as Robinson Point near Belize City and also around Lighthouse, Glover's

Reef and Turneffe. We were told that they fish at night in Belize's Marine Protected Areas. One fisherman stated "deh noh pay no attention to no protected area." The Sapodilla Caye Marine Protected Area was specifically mentioned in this regard.

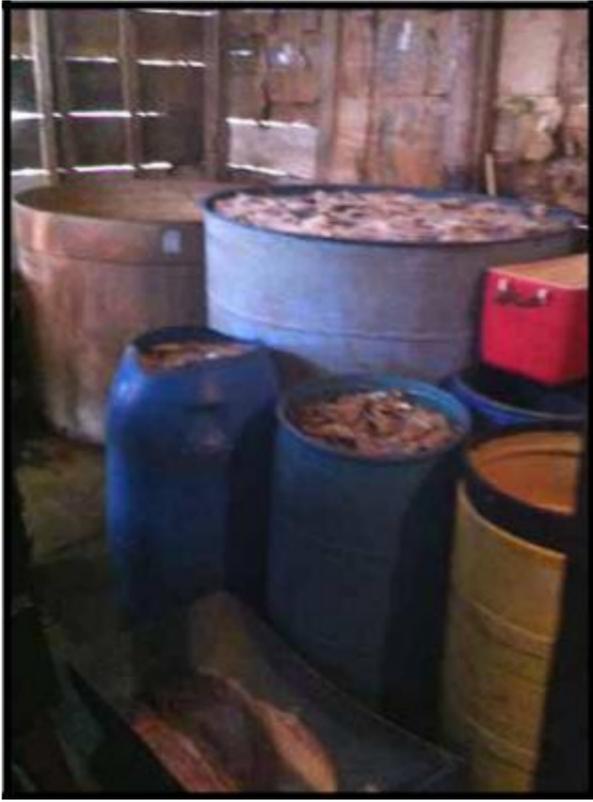
These vessels, although primarily targeting shark, extract large quantities of finfish plus undersized conch, crabs and shrimp. These catches were documented photographically and clearly indicate that some of these vessels are dragging their nets along the sea floor essentially acting as trawlers. (Trawling was banned in Belize in 2010.)

Livingston, Guatemala appears to be the epicenter of the shark and finfish trade from Belize. Once Belizean



Field of air dried fish

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*Fish Vats*

fish arrive in Livingston, shark fins are harvested, sharks and fish are cleaned and corned (salted) for local consumption and shark oil is processed. Villagers explained that three individuals purchase nearly all fish products from Belize. They buy any quantity or type of fish which is then stored in a warehouse in large plastic vats. One of these fish traders keeps \$500,000 Quetzales (BZ\$166,666) available in cash at all times for conducting business. On any given day, this trader holds funds to purchase up to 33,333 pounds of Belizean fish and shark.

A peek inside one of these facilities revealed row upon row of holding tanks filled with shark meat, and various species of fish including permit fish, snook and even sprat. Several nearby piers were filled with recently salted fish being dried. This site is impressive and clearly displays the magnitude of the trade.

Among the fish taken from Belizean waters are nurse, hammerhead, tiger and bull sharks, as well as tarpon, permit, snook, bonefish and catfish. Fish processors revealed that other marine species including turtles, manatees and dolphins are also delivered from Belize.

Shark fins are a major source of income for these large-scale gillnetters. Shark fishermen indicated that Belizean shark fins sell for US\$100 per

pound in Guatemala and that a large shark can generate up to 12 pounds of fins. This lucrative market is kept separate from the shark meat market with fins quickly removed and transferred for sale, presumably to the Asian market. Sources explained that shark meat brings approximately US\$4 - \$5 per pound so this is also a lucrative market with an estimated 100,000 - 200,000 pounds of shark meat per year being netted in Belize for sale in Livingston.

Through conversations with fish processors, we learned that sport fishing species including bonefish, permit, tarpon and snook are regularly harvested (with gillnets) in Belizean waters and then transported to Guatemala to be sold for food. In Livingston, we observed several 80-gallon drums of corned (salted) permit fish, the sport-fishing species most prized in Belize. This is a major concern for fishing guides and others working in the sport fishing industry throughout Belize who point out that these species are protected nationally through the 2009 "Catch and Release" law. Based on a 2013 study by Dr. Anthony Fedler, the harvest and export of sport fish to Guatemala for food puts at risk BZ\$110 million dollars of annual Belizean revenue and more than 2,100 Belizean jobs. One naturalized Be-

elizean from Guatemala with 15 years of fishing experience explained that foreign fishermen skirt the law by claiming to live in Belize while actually residing in Guatemala. He explained that naturalized Guatemalan fishermen can receive a Belizean fishing license and an export permit from the Fisheries Department if they can verify that they have a Belizean address by producing a utility bill in their name. At a meeting with fishermen in

Guatemala from Belize told us that they are rarely checked by Customs. Export documents are quickly stamped by agents in Punta Gorda or Independence and they are simply asked to, "Bring us something when you return."

Belizean fishermen are acutely aware of the foreign presence in their waters and the benefits foreign gillnet fishers are enjoying at their expense. One fisherman called his catch "a drop in the bucket"

In summary, this appears to be a major marine incursion into Belize's territory similar to what is occurring in the Chiquibul National Forest. Large quantities of Belizean fish are being exported for sale in Guatemala with zero benefit to Belize. This incursion is perhaps more significant than Chiquibul in that it is severely damaging two of Belize's most important industries - commercial fishing and tourism, to say nothing of our food resources.

Recent data shows that 35% of our Gross Domestic Product comes from tourism with 60% of tourists participating in marine activities. Without fish, this is all in jeopardy.

Editor's Note: It appears the availability of fresh fish has become limited in Belize. Several local restaurants report that they cannot find a reliable source of fresh fish and have thus turned to imported fish from Southeast Asia to serve their customers.



*Permit Fish in holding tanks*

Dangriga, one person openly acknowledged that he rents a house in Belize to several different fishermen who actually live in Guatemala, stating "Hey, I have a place to rent and they want to rent it." We were informed that others use addresses that don't actually exist. One source indicated, "These fishermen cannot be found at these addresses because they actually live in Guatemala and these are only fake addresses."

Export permits may be used for as many as six boats. This is meant to be used by one exporter owning up to six boats but these permits are simply photo-copied and used by multiple fishermen. Export permits with a face value of BZ\$100 are sold for inflated prices.

Fishermen who regularly transport fish to

when compared with foreigners. Local fishers complained that patrols are few and that they primarily apply strict rules on Belizeans and not fishermen from neighboring countries who are using larger boats, gillnets and long lines to fish their stocks which are quickly declining. They indicate these foreign fishers freely fish at night in Belizean waters when patrols are limited.

Recent information provided by Fisheries Administrator - Beverly Wade - notes that there are 83 licensed gillnet fishers and 70 licensed shark fishermen in Belize. This obviously does not include the substantial influx of gillnet fishers from Guatemala who are wreaking havoc on Belize's commercial fisheries and tourism industry.



*Salted shark meat*



