Fishing in Jamaica

The Fishing Industry in Jamaica, comes under the supervision of the Fisheries Division of the Ministry of Agriculture. This was established in December 1949 as a sub-division of the Forestry Department. It deals mostly with fish culture and conservation work. Fishing in Jamaica falls in one of two categories, namely MARINE and INLAND. I will begin today with MARINE FISHING. Let us first identify the major FISHING GROUNDS.

Major Fishing Grounds

1. Inshore: North Shelf

The north shelf has a continuous reef system and is less than one mile from the shore. The area has 69 active fishing beaches of varying sizes. The reef resource on the north shelf is heavily over-fished and many fishermen must supplement their incomes through farming or other employment.

2. Offshore: The Proximal Banks of Jamaica; Pedro Cays and Morant Cays

A significant amount of fish is caught in these areas. Many fishermen live on Pedro and Morant Cays for several months at a time. They fish in the surrounding areas and sell their catches to CARRIER and PACKER BOATS which transport the fish to Kingston and other ports. Fishermen from the mainland also travel to these areas and fish for one or two days before returning home. Profits from larger catches outweigh the cost and danger encountered on these long trips across open ocean.

3. Inshore: South Shelf

The south coast is Jamaica’s most productive fishing area but is over fished. It has a wider area than the north coast and larger offshore bank. The shelf extends to a minimum of 7 miles or 24 kilometres. Like the north shelf, there are fishing beaches of various sizes.

4. Offshore: Pedro Bank, Formigas Bank and Others

These banks have been customarily fished by Jamaicans for many years but are in international waters and can be legally fished by any country.

In addition to these areas, fishermen also catch OCEANIC fish from areas well away from the shelves and banks including several kinds of tuna, marlin and other bill fish, flying fish, sharks and sword-fish.

There are some 187 fishing beaches around the Jamaican coastline and the island has about 16,000 full time and part-time fishermen plying the surrounding waters. A significant number of fishermen fish from open canals and other small boats using fairly simple methods. When they are not in use, the canoes can be pulled on to the beach. Fishing canoes propelled by paddles and sails were quite dominant up until fairly recent time. However, most Jamaican fishermen now have outboard motors. Those fishermen with their small boats or canoes, tend to fish close to the shore while those with larger boats go greater distances to the offshore banks.

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Fishing Methods

The fishing methods used by the Jamaica fishermen are the use of fish pots, lines and nets. Fish pots is the most common method used. These are called Antillean Z-shaped traps and are made from mesh wire supported by a wooden frame. A special type of wood is used, one that will not harm the fish. Examples are lancewood and rodwood. The pots vary in size. Fish bait is put into the pots. These are, sometimes, smaller fish. The pots are then attached to a rope and a buoy and then taken out to the sea and lowered into the shallow waters around the reefs. The buoy is used to mark the position of the fish pot. The design of the pots is of such that it allows the fish to enter but they cannot escape.

Lining: this method involves a long line with hooks being towed along by a boat.

These are legal methods of fishing discussed so far. Unfortunately, some fishermen employ illegal methods namely, the use of spear guns underwater to kill the fish and also the use of sticks of dynamite. Thousands of fish are often killed as a result of the explosion of the dynamite.

Here are some of the types of fish caught in the Jamaican waters: doctors, parrot, welchman, turbit, snapper, goatfish, shell fish such as lobster, conch and shrimp. The best time to go fishing is in the early morning or in the late evening. The fishing season extends from December to July. June to November is seen as a high risk period. Hurricanes and storms occur during this time.

The fishermen keep their boats and gears on or near the beach where they mend their nets and build traps in preparation for going to sea. The Fisheries Division sells and dispenses subsidies outboard motor fuel to licensed fishermen through sub-offices located at major beaches.

On the matter of marketing, it should be noted that higglers and other entrepreneurs wait and buy the catches as they are landed. Most times, they come from villages and towns close by to the fishing beaches. For example, vendors from May Pen would buy from the fishermen at Rocky Point or Farquhar Beach. They in turn re-sell the fish on the streets or in the local markets and supermarkets.

The problems of the fishermen are varied and many.

1) Piracy, that is, the stealing of another fisherman’s catch. This can result in much conflict between the fishermen.

2) Overfishing the constant removal of a large amount of fish from an area which results in the fish stock being greatly reduced.

3) Pollution in the form of garbage, sewage, industrial waste and oil spills. These can kill the fish and destroy the breeding ground for them.

4) Storage the lack of modern storage facilities at some fishing beaches, forces the fisherman to sell the fish fresh as soon as possible after returning to land.

5) Fish is not plentiful so catches are often small.
6) Only a small income is realized from the small catch.

7) The low income makes it difficult for the fishermen to purchase or replace equipment as well as procuring loans from financial institutions.

8) Competition comes from the cheaper fresh water fish which comes from inland fishing operations.