

Sailing Craft of Belize

by Tom Zydler

Sheltered by a long barrier reef and an archipelago of small islands, and benefitting from favourable tradewinds, Belize has long recognized the value of her wooden working sailing boats built by skilful local shipwrights. Unlike many neighbouring countries, Belize has numerous lobster sloops – protected by strict fisheries regulations – and shoal-draughted sand lighters still earning a living.

To reach the Central American country of Belize a vessel must first negotiate one of the narrow channels through a barrier reef 135 miles long. In the late 1980s as a ship charged between the foaming breakers the first sign of human presence on the azure and placid inshore waters would have been the many white sails of the fishing fleets.

In sharp contrast to the rest of the world, fishermen working under sail were then thriving in Belize thanks to timely conservation measures which kept the sea alive with lobsters and fish. From the 1960s, when national cooperatives took over the fisheries business from foreign middlemen, the number of fishing sloops rose dramatically and, with the growing

demand for seafoods, the Belizean fishermen moved from a subsistence level to a significant place in the national economy. Today, the web site of the Belize government proudly announces that “Belize has a viable fishing industry. During 1996, Bz\$24.3million of marine products were exported. Laws protect rock or spring lobster to avoid over-



With no method for reefing their generous sail areas, the Belizean fishing sloops are subject to exaggerated heeling which badly affects their windward performance. The fishermen therefore have become thoroughly adept at using primitive “trapezes” – lines to the masthead – to reduce heel.