



Haulover Creek. During the fishing season, the sloops carry the little dugout canoes (locally called dories) on their side decks, one for each member of the crew. From these the men dive for lobsters and crayfish equipped with nothing more than face masks, long hooks, and their bare hands.

fishing; there is a closed season from March to July. Export markets for scale fish are mainly in the United States, Mexico, and Jamaica.

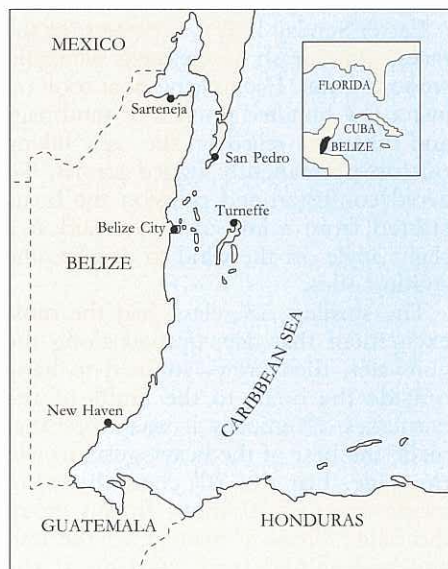
“The Belize Fisheries Department was established in 1965 and has been mandated to manage a sector that has been in existence for several generations – the Fisheries Sector. Belize’s fisheries are exploited for commercial as well as subsistence purposes and are one of the most heavily exploited natural resources. In an effort to maximize the benefits obtained from the fishing industry, while insuring its long-term viability, fisheries managers are promoting an expansion in production through diversification of the resource base.

“Belize’s fishing industry is small and growing; it is an industry with great potential for diversity. The Fisheries Export Products are: lobster, conch, finfish, aquarium fish, stone crab claws, shrimp, shark, dry sea farine, and smoked fish.”

However, to talk to the fisherman is to hear a different story. Joe Young, sometime shipwright and now fisherman knows that the day when he must cross over to the tourist industry is coming all too soon. Fishing, he says “is strong right now but it is dying fast because the reef is dying”.

The Sloops of Sarteneja

While sailing the Belizean waters in 1989 I encountered 155 sloops and most of the interviewed crewmen came from the village of Sarteneja. Friendly, Spanish speaking, and obviously descended from Mayan stock, they extolled their home as the centre of boatbuilding and tranquility. Eager to see this maritime Utopia we sailed north.



It was the middle of March; lobster season had just ended and the Easter holidays were a few days away ensuring that the fishermen would be at home. As we hove in view of the village we were greeted by a forest of masts with a few sails scooting among them. The village pier was jam-packed with boats unloading their dugout dories and fishing gear. The largest items to come out of the holds were insulated iceboxes that kept the catch chilled for up to fifteen days. The men handling the heavy loads were generally very young and fit enough to free-dive as deep as eight fathoms in pursuit of the lucrative lobster.

The ten months of fishing drudgery were forgotten now with the sloop races uppermost in everyone’s mind. Several boats were bending on new sails made from cheap Mexican polyester. Sewn in the village and roped with polypropylene line they last for only about two years. The low-aspect jib-headed mainsails are always gunter rigged. Their booms extend far beyond the sterns allowing no room for backstays and the only standing rigging supporting the solid masts are two shrouds tensioned by lanyards through deadeyes mounted on small bitts. The tightly wedged masts are stepped one third of the overall length