

Outlooks on Diversification: Ocean Harvest

Horace Walters, St. Lucia's Chief Fisheries Officer, is committed to the philosophy of scientific fishing. "There is money to be made," Walters remarked in a *Business Focus* interview, but it's no longer a question of "just going out with some lines."

The complex issues of managing marine resources range from policy-making to marketing. Today, the hot issues in fishing are protection of the stocks, which have dramatically declined in many areas of the world due to over-fishing, illegal poaching, and destructive fishing techniques; regional cooperation; the safety and education of fishermen; and improved transportation, storage, processing, and preparation.

Increased nutritional awareness has caused a surge in the demand for seafood. St. Lucia has the potential to achieve complete self-sufficiency if current resources – including tuna, kingfish, dorado, flying fish, lobster, bottom fish, potfishing, reef fisheries, and aquaculture – were fully utilized. Not only could the local population be assured a steady supply of healthy, easily digested protein, but the tourist industry could favorably influence the balance of trade by relying exclusively on "homegrown"

product in restaurants, and a thriving export market would be a real possibility if the capacity to process and transport were there. (See article on the Vieux Fort Fishing Port Project, p.11).

Meanwhile, obstacles to self-sufficiency are plentiful, whether natural or man-made. For example, most fish migrate. Lobster eggs laid in St. Lucian waters often remain suspended until they're heavy enough to sink, 6 to 8 weeks later, about the time they reach Antigua. The French and Venezuelans illegally poach in our exclusive economic zone every day, and the French fail to observe the size restrictions and closed seasons considered essential in managing a regional resource. Banks and venture capitalists are not forthcoming with loans for development of the industry.

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Horace Walters, Chief Fisheries Officer, has worked for nearly 30 years to make "scientific fishing" a reality.



Still, the potential is tantalizing, and Walters has seen great promise in St. Lucia's fisheries since the late 60s, when he joined the Ministry of Trade, Industry, Agriculture, and Tourism. St. Lucia's then sole fisheries officer died in 1970, leaving Walters alone in a tiny office with an annual budget of \$EC720.

That was before he put his scientific fishing philosophy into action. Today the annual fisheries budget is \$2 million, and Walters oversees a staff of 40, including a dozen professionals with impressive scientific and management credentials. Walters himself pursued extensive training in Canada, at the Newfoundland College of Fisheries, and earned his BA in Business Administration from St. Francis Xavier in Nova Scotia, focusing on the business aspects of fishing. Later he earned an MSC in Economics from the London School of Economics, with emphasis in Sea Use Law, Economics and Policy. Walters has been instrumental in training many of the Caribbean's key fisheries officers, and currently consults with the FAO.

Agriculture

Three Decades of Major Change

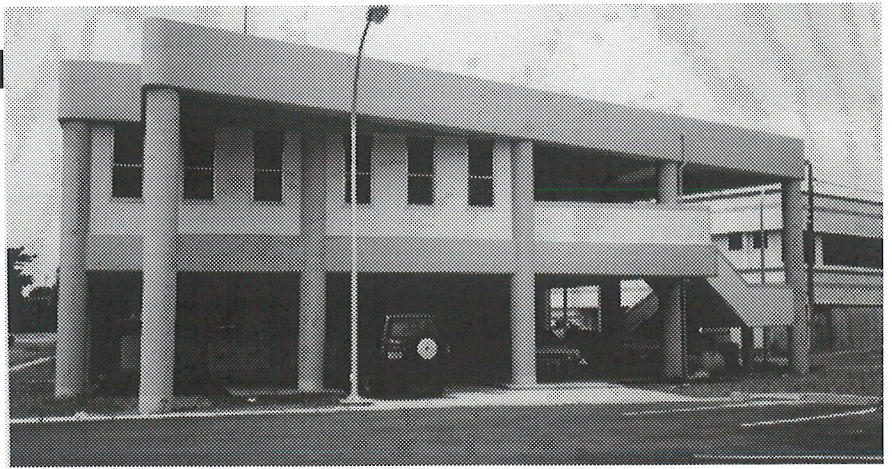
Walters was instrumental in the initial development of the Castries fisheries complex in the late 70s, when he impressed upon the then Premier, John Compton, the importance of seeking assistance from the Canadian government to build a cold storage facility. From studying years of landing statistics, Walters knew that even 250 tons of cold storage would not be adequate to meet demand. Funding was approved for 125 tons, and within two months the new facility was at full capacity. Today, with the generous financial support of the Japanese Assistance Program, the Castries Fisheries Complex now has three new buildings, for offices, increased storage capacity, and a retail market. Refrigerated vehicles and cold storage mean that the complex can buy as much fish as fishermen can bring in, at guaranteed prices.

During his nearly 30 years in the field, Walters has seen many other such positive changes, including the passing of a Harmonized Fishing Act in 1984, designed to protect the interdependent regional resource with closed seasons for lobster, minimum size requirements, and a moratorium on endangered species.

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In the 90s, fishermen are assured safer and more profitable working conditions, thanks to fiberglass boats, improved education and training programs, better gear methods, and advanced navigational aids. The traditional gombier canoes are being phased out in the interest of protecting St. Lucia's endangered parrot; the gombier tree is the parrot's preferred habitat. Fishermen now get \$4 to \$5 a pound for major species, compared to 25 cents in 1969. "Back then," Walters commented, "the middlemen would sit on the beach until evening, though the fishermen might come in with boats full of fish, to force a drop in the price."

The generous support of the Japanese Assistance Program enabled the Castries Fisheries Complex to burgeon with new office space, retail space, and storage capacity. This bustling port is busy from dawn to well after sunset.



Though over 200 fiberglass boats are now on the water, the field is wide open. With open seasons on most species and no permits required, "Anybody can jump in," Walters observed. Scientific fishing methods also assure greater employment opportunities, because fishermen can stay out longer, three to four days at a time, instead of coming in each evening, thus saving fuel and landing greater quantities of fish. One drawback is that current boat loan rates, approximately 8 to 8.5%, are still beyond the reach of small fishermen with no collateral.

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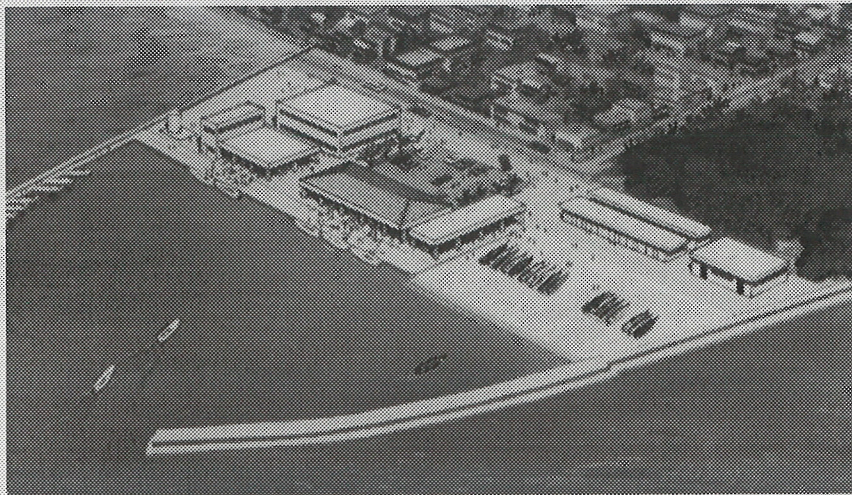
shrimp currently imported by hotels, developing substitutes for imported saltfish, and developing food pellets with local materials for use in aquaculture instead of imported brine shrimp.

Aquaculture: A Superb Diversification Alternative

Aquaculture is an exciting diversification option now open to farmers. Sixteen acres are currently under cultivation, and any farmer who is interested in diversifying can contact the Fisheries Division for assistance in converting land into hatcheries. Staff aquaculturists will help farmers develop water systems, ponds, and offer assistance from production to marketing.

Launched in the early 80's with the help of Peace Corps volunteers, St. Lucia's aquaculture is a promising source of tilapia and freshwater prawns; hotels will pay top prices for freshwater prawns, which tend to be tastier and less expensive than marine shrimp. Oyster research will commence in the next few months.

Unfortunately venture capital is slow to come. As Walters observes, "people are not adventurous with their money." Ultimately, despite the global marketing and communications possible in a computerized era, in St. Lucia, "Global vision has not hit us yet." But he adds, with a smile, "We're slowly getting there."



An artist's rendition illustrates the port, cruise ship pier, and extensive commercial and residential development envisioned once land reclamation is complete.

The Vieux Fort Fishing Port Project

This major land reclamation project will ultimately provide a port larger than Dennery's, with 400 tons cold storage and full processing capacity, making it St. Lucia's primary fisheries centre. Fishermen will be able to target larger fish, including swordfish and big tuna, without needing to truck their catch to Castries for processing.

When complete, St. Lucia will finally have the capacity to enter the export market, particularly to the United States and Japan, where consumers are eager for high-quality seafood.

The new Fishing Port will also offer a cruise ship pier, allowing for a significant increase in tourism capacity, as well as extensive residential development. The construction phase alone will guarantee numerous employment opportunities.