Cuba gets fishery management advice in Provincetown

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It might seem odd: Cuban fisheries managers and scientists seated around a table in this fabled but faded Cape Cod
fishing port, sharing their stories of managing crocodiles, manatees and reef fish while trying to absorb the successes and failures of the New England fisheries.

But, as Elisa Garcia, Cuba's director of fishing regulations and science put it, there is universality to the problems nations encounter in managing fish stocks.

"We all gain from the exchange and the experience of my colleagues from the United States," Garcia said through a translator during a break in a conference last week featuring fisheries experts from Cuba, the United States and Mexico, at the Center for Coastal Studies. "We are talking about different places and species but the problems are similar," she added.

The Environmental Defense Fund, a national and international environmental advocacy organization, sponsored the Provincetown
conference as one of five meetings with international fishery experts they hold each year that are intended to address issues in Cuban fisheries management, where the EDF has been working for almost 15 years. The United States, Mexico and Cuba have been working together, both through official and unofficial channels, on Gulf of Mexico fisheries issues and sustainable fishing practices.

EDF staffers believe the New England experience, both positive and negative, could be valuable for the Cubans. As lifting the 54-year-old U.S. embargo of Cuba is hotly debated, and some say imminent, Provincetown is an example of how the pressure from tourism and development can affect fishing's shoreside facilities such as piers, supply shops and processing plants.

"We learn from each country, even if the fishery is different," said Stuart Fulton, an oceanographer from Great

Britain, working on marine conservation with a Mexican environmental organization.

Most of the rest of the Caribbean islands' ecosystems have been devastated by development, but the U.S. embargo has helped to insulate Cuba, the region's largest island, said Les Kaufman, a Boston University biology professor and specialist in marine biodiversity.

"Cuba is the jewel of the Caribbean," he said.

Still, the participants at the Provincetown conference were well aware that they only have a finite period to protect what they have before it is sorely tested when the embargo is eventually lifted, Kaufman said. "As soon as the embargo is lifted, this wonderful opportunity to get it right will be rolled over like a steamroller."

While Kaufman described some Cuban fishery management as forward-thinking, such as linking land conservation with marine
protected areas, other experts said sustainability is still an issue.

"They are playing catch-up in terms of fishery management," said Daniel Whittle, EDF's director of their Cuban program.

The Cuban lobster fishery is the major revenue producer, similar to New England where lobster vies with scallops here for the No. 1 spot. But, unlike in New England, home to the longest continuously running survey of fish species in the world, Cuba knows very little about its other fish populations, Whittle said.

Garcia said her contingent was primarily interested in learning how to manage their extensive network of marine protected areas. While on paper they protect 25 percent of their marine waters — 17 percent are completely protected from fishing and other activities — Cuba has problems enforcing those bans, Whittle said.

And, Cuban officials don't know if they are protecting the right areas, although EDF is trying to help them to use information from fishermen on catches and do some catch sampling to help identify how vulnerable each species is and where it is being caught.

Meanwhile, New England's closed areas are, in part, protected by requiring nearly all fishing vessels to have satellite tracking devices on board. With 8,000 private fishing craft and 749 in fleets affiliated with the government, the Cubans are interested in protections that come from fishermen themselves. They heard how New England developed its fishing cooperative system in 2010, when fishermen formed groups that then developed a plan to sustainably manage the amount of quota allocated to each membership.

Catherine O'Keefe, a researcher with the University of Massachusetts School of Marine Science and Technology, demonstrated how fishermen and other stakeholders could contribute to managing a fishery by using available real-time data such as water temperature, or catch reports, to avoid hot spots with negative consequences to the environment or a particularly depleted species.

"It can be no-tech," O'Keefe told the conference. "The idea is communicating information. Boat-to-boat. Captain-to-captain."