

Queen of the Caribbees: Farming and Fishing Foci on the Island of Nevis

by

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Photographs by the authors

Introduction

In an April 2010 speech commemorating the opening of a new agricultural processing center on the Caribbean island of Nevis, the Honorable Joseph Parry, Premier of the island, noted the facility's contribution to achieving the goal of having the people of Nevis "eat local, eat Nevisian and eat healthy" (NIA 2010). In touting the benefits of local agriculture to the well-being of the Nevisian people, Premier Parry continued a long history of his island's reliance upon the produce of its own land—and of the rich waters surrounding it—for food. So much was Nevis known for its provisioning, governing, and nurturing role within the region that it was called by one nineteenth century historian, "a Mother state" (Davy 1855, 488). In earlier times it was known as the "Queen of the Caribbees" for its precocious productivity and for spawning subsequent settler ventures on other Caribbean islands. This history of self-sufficiency, surplus, and provision has set Nevis apart from many of the other islands of the Commonwealth Caribbean, whose own agricultural pasts were largely based upon the monocultural production of sugar and other high-profit agricultural export commodities. Yet, the Nevisian subsistence record is hardly smooth or continuous. Disjunctions and disruptions have posed sets of challenges that largely define both its economic and ecological trajectory.

As the world, and particularly the Caribbean islands, experiences the effects of globalization, each nation's food security is increasingly linked to events in other nations. As many Caribbean nations turn a growing percentage of their land area toward tourism and related pursuits, such as vacation "second home" developments, less is available for agriculture. Likewise, as more Caribbean citizens seek to improve

their livelihoods through employment in the tourism sector or through emigration, fewer workers are available for local agriculture and fishery industries. Among the islands of the English-speaking Caribbean, Nevis stands out for its rededication to local food production, both through agriculture and fisheries. This positioning has roots in the colonial history of the island. While Nevis was a precocious "sugar island," being among the earliest to base its economy on sugar cultivation, it was also among the first to exhaust and abandon this option. Self-provisioning of foodstuffs—from both land and sea—had also been an earlier objective. In the wake of sugar's demise, self-provisioning assumed an even greater importance. Through the first two-thirds of the 20th century, garden and reef provided much of Nevis' subsistence needs as well as feeding its regional export efforts. By the 1970s, however, contingent events combined with exogenous forces led to the decline of local self-provisionment practices. In only the past few years has the effort to revitalize local food production taken hold. Both governmental policy and selected popular initiative suggest that Nevis may once again gain its distinctive place in the Leeward Islands as a garden spot.

Study Location

The Leeward Islands comprise the northern half of the Lesser Antilles from Montserrat in the south to the Virgin Islands in the north (Figure 1). The outer islands (Anguilla, Antigua, Barbuda, St. Barthélemy, and St. Martin/Maarten) are low-lying coral and limestone formations while the inner islands (Montserrat, Nevis, Saba, St. Christopher [St. Kitts], and St. Eustatius) are volcanic islands with significant elevations. The outer/inner island dichotomy is also characterized by differing precipitation patterns. The outer

islands receive roughly half the annual rainfall (ca 1000mm) as the inner islands. Depending on elevation, however, the disparities can be fourfold or more. Greater rainfall plus the advantages conferred by volcanic soils and elevation zonation make the inner islands more suitable for gardening activities. There is also a north to south gradient with slightly more annual precipitation occurring at lower latitudes. Accordingly, the southernmost islands in the group, Nevis and Montserrat, have the strongest horticultural traditions.

Nevis is less than 40 square miles in area, roughly oval-shaped, with a single volcano dominating the landscape. Nevis Peak, at 965 m (3166 ft) elevation supports heavy vegetation above the 500 m contour line and its summit is often shrouded in clouds (Figure 2). It is said that the white clouds atop the mountain resembled snow to Columbus or one of his crewmen and that the island's name is a corruption of *nieves*—Spanish for *snows*—though the island had long been called *Oualie* ("the land of beautiful water") by its Carib inhabitants (Kaufman and Macpherson 2005).

In recent decades Nevis has maintained a population of slightly less than 10,000 persons. During the same period the natural rate of increase has fluctuated between one and two-percent but mortality along with outmigration and transnational circulation have kept the total population fairly constant. Some 90% of the population is of African descent with the remainder comprised of people of European and South Asian ancestry. It is unclear if Nevis was inhabited when Columbus passed by in 1493. Unlike the small pocket of remnant Caribs in the Windward Islands or the genetic traces of Awarak peoples in the Greater Antilles, Nevis' aboriginal population does not even register a spectral presence in local lore or consciousness. However, the recent

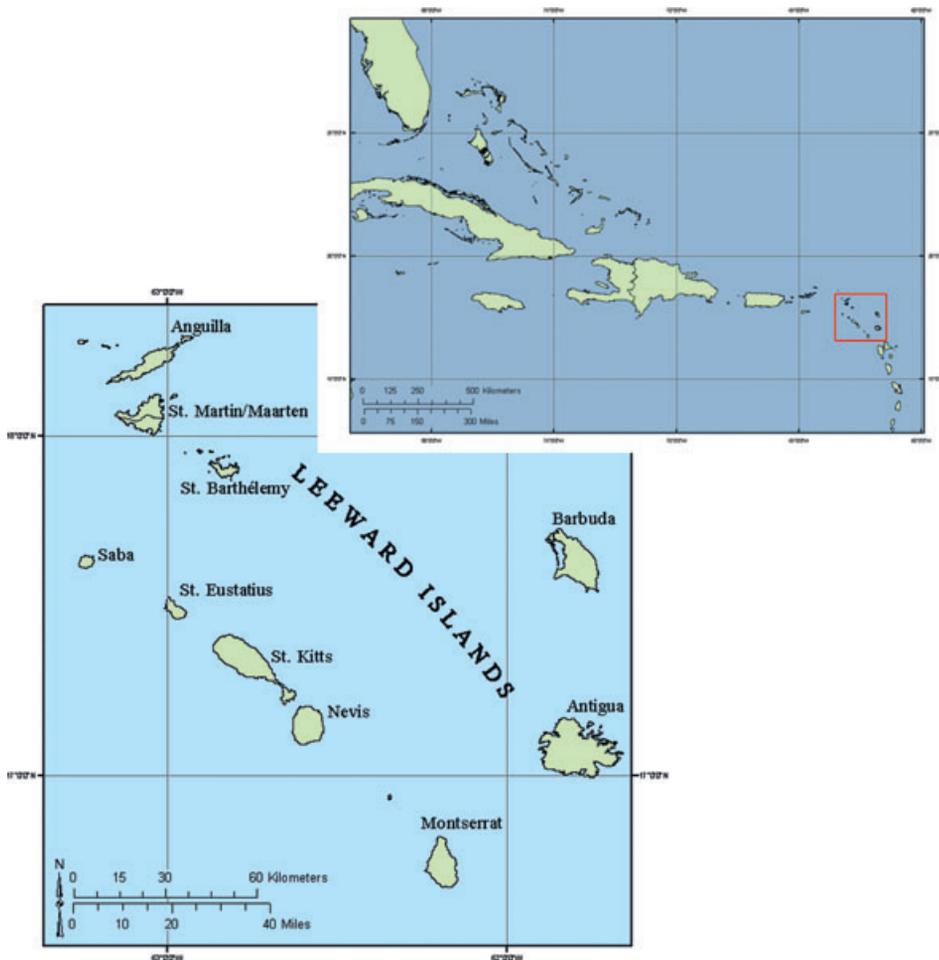


Figure 1. This map shows the Lesser Antilles region with St. Kitts and Nevis roughly in the center.



Figure 2. Nevis Peak rises above fruit and flower trees on a rare near-cloudless day.

work being done by archaeologists on Nevis should help to reverse this erasure (Fitzpatrick and Keegan 2007; Wilson 2010). Today, even if single individuals do not know all the other Nevisians, older individuals are apt to know of most of the families on the island. Thus, effectively and affectively it is a small place. One hears the same family names repeated often and encounters charming traditional practices, such as the habit, when boarding a public bus, of greeting all of the other passengers before sitting down.

Methodologies and the AGS Bowman Antillean Expedition

The authors spent the summer of 2008 in Nevis, surveying contemporary farming and fishing activities in the context of food security concerns. The project was part of the American Geographical Society's Bowman Antillean Expedition. To date, the Bowman program has funded Latin American research in Mexico, the Antilles, and Colombia. The main focus of this research has been on questions of resources, land use, and property regimes.

Agriculture

The land-based portion of our fieldwork involved what some geographers have mildly ridiculed as "cabbage counting." Among them were Carl Sauer and his critique of the 1930s Midwestern geographers' campaign to seemingly map every corn field and cabbage patch between Ohio and Iowa. Our objective was somewhat different: it was to map every garden on Nevis, and we believe we came close (Figure 3). The tools available to the twenty-first century geographer allow for more detailed, precise, and time-efficient mapping than could have been imagined in Sauer's day—though many of the perils remain the same. Thus, as we walked the perimeter of every agricultural plot on the island, we carried with us a sampling of technologies both modern and ancient: a hand-held global positioning system (GPS) unit in one hand and a machete (still called a "cutlass" throughout much of the English-speaking Caribbean) in the other. We wore waterproof, breathable Gore-Tex jackets but our pockets were stuffed with mango leaves—a Nevisian folk remedy for the stings of a certain type of locally occurring nettle. In addition to recording the spatial extent of every garden plot, field, and collection of raised beds on the island, we interviewed local farmers, recording



Figure 4. This site, like many former sugar mills in Nevis, has fallen into disrepair.



Figure 5. A Nevisian home-gardener stands with some of her plants.

and remittances played a large role in supporting the stay-at-home populations. The Depression put even this adventuresome option into the precarious-at-best column.

The British colonial authorities turned to promoting smallholder fruit and vegetable production, hoping not only that the island could become more self-sufficient, but that it could export produce to St. Kitts and the other Leeward sugar islands as well. The colonial government acquired a few estates that had ceased sugar cultivation, or were in arrears on taxes, for redistribution to peasant producers with the hope that a viable economy based on smallholder garden productions could be fostered. In some ways the “early” collapse of Nevis’ plantation system some half-century before the colonial era expired with St. Kitts and Nevis’s independence in 1983, was a blessing. Unlike St. Kitts with its landless agro-industrial sugar proletariat, the average Nevisian was a smallholder and petty producer living in a “chattel” house on an acre or less. But with abundant fruit trees for shade, a house-lot garden for medicinal and food provisions, access to larger common-ground garden plots far upslope on the volcano, or a parcel on former sugar estate land, and a menagerie of goats, sheep, donkeys, and cattle left to forage on the increasingly xerophytic vegetation on the downslope former cotton lands, most Nevisians were probably better off economically than their wage-earning counterparts on St. Kitts and

Antigua during the 1940s through the 1960s. Several contingent events from the 1970s have helped to unravel this culture and economy of relative self-sufficiency, while at the same time local officials realize that self-subsistence may be one of the more promising and prudent paths forward.

Fishing History

The British Colonial Blue Books (registers of economic data) spanning the century between the 1840s and 1950s tell of consistent productivity from fishing activities. “Good fish is taken for daily consumption but none is cured or exported” was an oft-repeated summary year after year. It appears that fishing for local consumption, rather than for export, has been the norm on Nevis since the earliest European occupation. As with most of the Caribbean islands, during the colonial period especially, fish imported from the North Atlantic complemented the local catch. The Blue Books show a marked increase in the number of fishing boats operating from Nevis during the mid-nineteenth century. From 1840 to 1860 the number of fishing boats more than quadrupled – from “about 30” to 130. Most likely with onset of Emancipation in 1837, many Nevisians literally “took to the sea” in search of subsistence. This apparent attractiveness of the fishing industry remains evident in Nevis today, though it

is far from universal. Culturally, there exist both motivating factors and challenges to individuals considering a career in fishing.

Challenges to Food Security: Migration and Human Tragedy

Like the other Leeward islanders from the 1840s on, Nevisians developed strong migratory patterns and networks: first to other Caribbean colonies and countries for periodic labor stints, then by 1900 the lines lengthened to the imperial metropole or its North American counterparts, where more permanent roots were set. These pathways were seldom one-way, rather they were circuits with people pulsating back and forth and petty monetary and cultural capital remitting homeward in step with the larger rhythms of the North Atlantic world. While the remittances underwrote land purchases and house constructions, and in some cases pensioners who could pursue food gardening as more than a retirement hobby, trans-colonial (from Nevis to another colony) and transnational (to the metropolises) migration probably kept population below a threshold (Boserup 1965, Richardson 1983) that would have necessitated highly intensive agriculture.

By the 1960s Nevis had a vibrant home gardening culture, with older women as the main practitioners (Figure 5). Women were also the primary hawksters, or marketers. Like the higgler in Jamaica (Katzin 1959), hawksters in the Eastern Caribbean



Figure 6. Hawksters sell produce in Charlestown, Nevis.



Figure 7. Hawksters unload produce from a Dominican cargo ship.

sell fruits and vegetables in the local market, but also transport the products to more distant markets (Figures 6, 7).

According to lore and local history, an all-too-human disaster may have been the single most damaging factor in the decline of Nevis's gardening culture. The evening of August 30, 1970, after a day of marketing and revelry in Basseterre at the annual Emancipation Day celebrations, the last ferry back to Charlestown left the dock seriously overloaded. Meant to hold 150 passengers, the *Christina* took on 250. Listing from the start, an overcorrection in steering capsized the boat. There were only ninety survivors. A large number of gardeners and hawksters were among the drowned. Looking back nearly four decades later, most Nevisians we spoke with about the disaster said that gardening never truly recovered from the loss of its best and most devoted practitioners. As Prime Minister Joseph Parry remarked marking the anniversary of the *Christina* disaster:

"I don't know if we realise when the *Christina* went down and the shock hit the island of Nevis, how many persons suffered as a result. People had nervous breakdowns, people never ever recovered from that experience but even our farming situation seemed to have lost momentum and even today, we have not regained that momentum. So the loss was not only in terms of human capital but it was also counted in economic losses." (SKNVibes 2007)

Whether this is an accurate assessment or not awaits systematic inquest and analysis.

Cultural and Generational Change

A less abrupt, but perhaps even more erosive force against gardening has been the role of generational change on both cultural and vocational levels. When asked why young people seem to have little or no interest in gardening for either recreation or livelihood, adults invariably splayed their palms and looked down at their hands. No verbal response was needed. Between remittances, a growing tourist industry, and the beginning encroachments of the international drug trade, agricultural wage labor or home-grown production and marketing were no longer seen as acceptable career paths. Clean and uncalled hands, preferably at rest on a clerical desk, were as much a mark of social mobility as trips abroad and sporting the latest consumer goods.

A similar distaste for fishing is evident among the younger generations. In this case, the current attitude stands in contrast with the historical status of fishermen, noted by Bonham Richardson (1983, 40) who called fishing, "an occupation to which many aspire, possibly because of its relative prestige as much as the financial rewards." Contemporary local commentators on Nevisian fishing are not necessarily in agreement about the current status of fishing as an occupation. For example, Arthur Anslyn (former Fisheries Minister) remarked that fishing is often an occupation of last resort, left only to those who could not succeed in other endeavors. By comparison, Charles Cozier, who is 83 years old and began fishing professionally in his late teens, sees an increase in the status of Nevisian

fishermen, owing to their potential for relatively large incomes.

Monkeys

In addition to cultural change, the catastrophes of shipwreck, and the occasional hurricane, Nevisian food security is challenged by the presence of several invasive or introduced species—particularly the vervet (or "African green") monkey (*Chlorocebus aethiops sabaeus*), introduced from Africa during the seventeenth century (Figure 8). Seeking a whimsical addition to their ornamental gardens or perhaps just a shipboard pet for the trans-Atlantic journey, early European planters and slave-traders imported these monkeys, either to Nevis directly or to a nearby island, most likely St. Kitts, from which the monkeys subsequently spread to Nevis and other islands in the region (Denham 1987). The feral populations expanded rapidly and caused much agricultural damage, being first declared a "vermin" in Barbados in 1682, with a bounty offered for each monkey killed (McGuire 1974).

Today, estimates of the monkey population on Nevis vary widely, from 50,000 to 100,000 by some agricultural authorities, to dubious figures below 10,000 by some researchers (e.g. Hernández 2010). A population double to the human population, e.g. about 20,000 seems reasonable. According to Wade Knowles, an expatriate estate owner, prior to Hurricane Hugo in 1989, most of the monkey population lived on the forested slopes of the volcano, Nevis Peak. As Knowles explained, "much of this habitat was destroyed by Hugo, and according to local residents, that is



Figure 8. A Vervet (African green) monkey peers from its arboreal perch.



Figure 9. A monkey pelt hangs on the fence of a Nevisian farm.

when the monkeys began serious foraging outside this preserve.” Whatever the numbers, after cultural predilections, the monkeys have become perhaps the single greatest obstacle to reviving Nevis’ gardening traditions.

The monkeys feed on nearly every variety of fruit and vegetable grown by island gardeners and have been known to destroy the entire season’s produce of a field in a matter of hours. Individual farmers have attempted various strategies for deterrence and eradication, including the installation of electric fencing and traps, targeted elimination with small-caliber firearms or trained dogs, and even the hanging of monkey pelts around a field’s perimeter as a kind of macabre—but ultimately ineffective—warning to other monkeys (Figure 9). All of these efforts have met with little lasting effect. Proposed large-scale population control efforts have never been fully implemented primarily because of the reluctance of the St. Kitts and Nevis government to authorize island-wide eradication programs, owing to attractiveness of the monkeys to tourists and the potential for negative publicity associated with the government-sanctioned killing of charismatic fauna, especially those in the Order *Primates*. At present the monkeys remain an unsolved problem to Nevisian agriculture, though certain non-lethal control methods such as trapping and the especially the administration of contraceptives hold potential.

Nevisian Food Production Today: Gardening

During the slavery era, most slaves on Nevis were not only allowed to cultivate small plots for their own subsistence, but often required to do so. On some of the larger and lower sugar islands such as Antigua and Barbados, provision grounds were limited by the compulsion to put every possible unit of land into sugar production. In these cases, foodstuffs (primarily wheat hard tack and salt cod) were routinely imported from the North Atlantic fields and fisheries. On Nevis the volcano and its saddles provided considerable land with steep relief better for food crops than the cash commodities sugar and later cotton. The resulting gardening culture that survived the slave era featured a mix of native Caribbean staple crops (manioc, maize, and sweet potatoes), introduced African cultivars (okra, pigeon peas, yams, watermelons) and European items such as radishes, cabbage and other *Brassic*as, lettuces, cucumbers and onions. With emancipation, former slaves move into the former upslope provision grounds or onto lands marginal to the remaining sugar and cotton estates. With some permanence in sight, they were able to also plant and tend a variety of tree crops, including papaya, sour and sweet sops, guava, and hog plum, avocado, cashew, all of New World origin, and citrus, bananas and plantains, but especially mangos of Old

World provenance. In our survey we found that current gardeners do not concentrate on producing the tropical staple starches that would have been the mainstay of both slave and freedman efforts. Today, the garden crop roster has been reduced or winnowed to reflect a more Euro-diet directed selection. Accordingly, tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, cabbage, broccoli, bell peppers, lettuce, eggplant, green beans, carrots, and spinach were common elements in the Nevisian gardens. Medicinal plants, condiments, and spices were also common but not grown in large quantities. Despite these changes in production, the air of personal self-reliance that developed during the days of slavery is still apparent among individual farmers on Nevis. We attended a meeting of the Nevis Growers’ Associations—a local agricultural organization—during which the comment, “Water and land: the government ain’t gonna give neither!” drew one of the most unanimous responses of the evening.

Our survey, greatly aided by the Nevis Agricultural Ministry’s staff, located some eighty agricultural ventures and gardening plots. While some of this produce does find its way to market, it appears that much is consumed by the producers. In the past decade there has been some movement on the part of non-Nevisians to set-up commercial gardening operations. One hydroponic venture supplies lettuce to the local restaurants, grocery stores, and

even exports lettuce to hotels on neighboring islands (Figure 10). Similarly, a Taiwanese agricultural mission is promoting gardening as a potential commercial arena for Nevis.

Edison Mays, the *sous-chef* at one of the restaurants at the Four Seasons Resort Nevis, remarked that serving local food to tourists is an endeavor that requires adjustment from all parties: restaurateurs, farmers, and fishermen alike. On the one hand, Mays states that, “you’ve got to support local producers.” On the other, he sees as part of his mission the need to “train farmers to produce what [he] need [s].” As though to emphasize these points, midway through our interview with Mays, a local fisherman arrived peddling a cooler full of fish: mostly smaller reef fish that had been speared or caught in pots, but with a large grouper prominently displayed on top. The chef bought the entire



Figure 10. Lettuce grows at a Nevisian hydroponic operation.



Figure 11. Old (left) and new style (right) fishing pots stand onshore.

lot and grouper was on the menu as the “catch of the day” for that evening’s meal.

Nevisian Food Production Today: Fishing

The Nevisian fisheries sector is comprised of fishermen pursuing five basic fishing strategies. Perhaps most emblematic of the Nevisian fishing modes is pot fishing. Known elsewhere as *trap fishing*, pot fishing involves the deployment and periodic retrieval of fish traps (locally called *pots*)—either baited or unbaited. The design of the pots themselves has undergone only slight changes since colonial times (Figure 11). The basic design is the Antillean Z-trap (Slack-Smith 2001) used throughout the region. It is a simple enclosure with a narrow funnel-shaped opening (or two) through which the fish can enter. Once inside, the fish usually fails to exit owing to the shape of the entrance funnel.

The traditional Nevisian pots are made of natural materials from local woods such as “yellow prickly” (*Fagara martinicensis*), Spanish ash (*Inga laurina*), or Suriname cherry (*Eugenia uniflora*) providing the ribs and mesh. Locally collected vines are used to tie the joints. More modern pots have wire mesh, though all-wood pots seem to be garnering a renewed interest. Local artisans make most Nevisian fishing pots for customers who must provide their own materials and charge about EC\$150 (US\$56) for their labor.

Pot fishermen often set several dozen pots throughout the reefs and nearshore waters surrounding Nevis, in water that is generally thirty to sixty feet in depth. Using small wooden dories (Figure 12) the fishermen make their rounds, collecting their catch and checking on—and perhaps baiting—their pots. Pot fishermen catch a variety of reef fish, mainly hind (*Serranidae* spp.) and surgeonfish (*Acunthuridae* spp.; locally called “doctorfish”), as well as various crustaceans.

What would seem to be a rather hands-off approach to fishing, in which one leaves his pots and hopes for the best, is seen as anything but by Nevisian pot fishermen. When we asked Charles Cozier, an octogenarian Nevisian and former pot fisherman, about his “luck” during his fishing career, Cozier replied, “Luck is a superstitious word, come maybe from Africa. Fishing is a skill.” From the proper construction of the pots, to the selection and securing of the bait, to the placement on the reef and timing of the retrieval, fishermen must make experienced-based decisions that—far more than luck—can determine the difference between a successful catch and an empty pot.

Nevisian fishermen practice two kinds of net fishing: seining and cast netting. The fisheries regulations limit the mesh size for seines to one inch (Heyliger 1995). Seine nets are dragged along an circular path, occasionally by wading fishermen but more often by those working in pairs of boats, until the two ends meet and a school of fish is trapped within. Cast nets, locally called *ballyhoo nets*, are limited in mesh size to ½ inch (Heyliger 1995).

Another fishing strategy that Nevisian fishermen employ involves diving—either free or with SCUBA gear. Diving fishermen primarily seek queen conch (*Strombus gigas*) and Caribbean spiny lobster (*Panulirus argus*), but are known to carry spear guns and Hawaiian slings for the purpose of taking reef fish as well. Conch is a local favorite but lobster is rarely consumed except by tourists due to its high exchange value.

Line fishing involves fishermen who work the farthest from shore and use the most modern equipment. Their catch consists mainly of dolphin fish (*Coryphaena hippuris*) but other pelagic species including Caribbean red snapper (*Lutjanus purpureus*) and various tunas (*Thunnus* spp.) are also caught. According to Arthur Anslyn—a former fisheries officer, former fisheries cooperative president, and current marine adviser to the island’s Prime Minister—line fishing holds the most potential for the future of Nevisian fishing and marine food security. “There is enough fish but we are not harvesting enough.” Most of Anslyn’s recommendations fall under the rubric of moving the fishery, in his words, “from artisanal to modern.” Among these—according to Anslyn—are the needs for boats to fish further offshore, to stay out longer, to increase and diversify the number of species sought, and to increase the use of



Figure 12. Nevisian reef fishing boats are beached after a day's work.

fish-aggregating devices (FADs). Anslyn also recognizes the need for more stringent conservation measures. He recommended establishing a closed ("zero-take") season for certain fish species and integrating marine science education curricula into the local school system.

As part of the tourism sector, sport fishing is often excluded from considerations of food security, owing to its participation by tourists, rather than locals. However it is common practice in Nevis—and elsewhere—for the boat owner to retain ownership of any fish caught by his clients. This arrangement makes for an interesting combination of tourism and local food production. Harry Yearwood, a young Nevisian captain and sportfishing boat owner, informed us that the primary species caught by sportfishermen are wahoo (*Acanthocybium solandri*), dolphin fish, and various billfish such as marlin (*Makaira spp.*) and Atlantic sailfish (*Istiophorus albicans*). Billfish are typically released alive but wahoo and dolphin are retained by the captain and sold to restaurants or directly to consumers. The sportfisherman himself may also purchase the fish, in whole or in part, from the boat owner.

Conclusions

Nevis, once a precocious beachhead in the British Caribbean colonial world, has largely lagged behind many of the

other islands in terms economic innovations and initiatives – whether it was industrializing or diversifying agriculture, welcoming tourists, or moving beyond the service to information technology economies. An apparent anachronism, it is now well-positioned to take advantage of current opportunities by drawing on past subsistence pursuits. Travel guides routinely remark that Nevis has escaped the crush of mass tourism, lacking both image and infrastructure. However, this absence also offers it the option of reviving its artisanal gardening and fishing foci in ways that can serve a thriving export trade with its more developed neighbors, and, at the same time, provide the backdrop for a more relaxed and environmentally sensitive tourism. Not exactly an "eco-tourism," but a tourism attuned to the burgeoning market for less complex and modernized landscapes and lifeways – especially those combined with local culinary expressions and experiences. In this regard, Nevis' coordinates on the global tourist map and its position among its sibling islands is favorable indeed, and once again Nevis may be seen as the "Queen of the Caribbees," this time as the mother of food gardening and artisanal fishing revivals.

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