

Survivor Story Spotlights Mexico's Fishing Methods

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Fishermen clean their fishing net in the hometown of sea survivor Jose Salvador Alvarenga, Garita Palmera, El Salvador, Tuesday, Feb. 4, 2014. Alvarenga's survival after more than 13 months in an open boat has proven a double miracle for his family, who lost touch with him years ago and thought he was dead. Alvarenga says he left Mexico in December 2012 for a day of shark fishing and ended up on the remote Marshall Islands. (AP Photo/Esteban Felix)

GARITA PALMERA, El Salvador (AP) — The saga of a fisherman who says he survived at least 13 months at sea in an open boat and made it across the Pacific Ocean to the Marshall Islands highlights the perilous and primitive fishing equipment and practices still used in Mexico, where he set out from, and in his native El Salvador.

Fishermen typically take to the sea in 27-foot open boats with no cover, no life jackets, primitive communications gear, with only a cloth wrapped around their heads for protection from the sun.

Jose Salvador Alvarenga says he spent at least 13 months drifting across 6,500 miles (10,500 kilometers) of open ocean before arriving in the Marshall Islands, the most striking such saga in recent years.

Alvarenga has told the news media he initially had a radio and a GPS locator, but both soon malfunctioned. For many fishermen, the only thing that stands between them and death on the high sea is an aging outboard motor, a wooden oar, a machete, a few plastic jugs of water — and their faith.

"When one is at sea, one is in the hands of God," said Manuel de Jesus Diaz, 39, who has fished from Alvarenga's hometown of Garita Palmera for 25 years. "We go out almost without anything, our clothes to cover us from the sun and water for the voyage."

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The situation is much the same in the southern Mexico state of Chiapas, where Alvarenga was living and where he set out on a shark-fishing trip in late 2012.

At the fishing hamlet of Costa Azul, in Chiapas, fishermen like Jorge Martinez acknowledged that "conditions are always going to be risky." Some wear plastic sandals, but many go to sea barefoot; the only thing that has changed over the centuries is that their nets are now nylon instead of hemp and their boats are now fiberglass instead of wood.

Hector Leal Soberanes, port captain of Puerto Madero, whose authority covers the area, said every registered fishing boat is required to carry a radio, life jackets and some form of location equipment.

But he noted that some of the small open fishing boats may avoid the rules. Moreover, they often travel as much as 60 miles (100 kilometers) out to sea — beyond the range of their low-end radios — and there is little authorities can do to stop them.

"They go really far out," Leal Soberanes said. "They are not permitted to go out (on the high seas), but what can we do about it? The sea is big."

While fishermen often depend on God as much as safety equipment, they also rely on sea skills picked up over a lifetime. Relatives say Alvarenga was unusually strong and resilient, and an experienced sailor.

Alvarenga said he survived on raw fish, birds, bird blood and turtles before washing ashore on the remote Marshall Islands atoll of Ebon last week.

The castaway, who says he is 37 years old, was getting medical treatment and food at a hotel in the Marshall Islands, as well as a shave and a haircut.

Gee Bing, the Marshall Islands' acting secretary of foreign affairs, said medical tests indicated Alvarenga was doing well. He was taking vitamins, and Tylenol for joint pain.

Bing said he expects it will take authorities a week or two to finalize Alvarenga's repatriation, and the Marshall Islands government will likely pay the cost of his stay.

Alvarenga said the fellow fisherman he initially set sail with, who he identified only by the first name of Ezequiel, died after about a month at sea and he threw the body overboard.

Claude Piantadosi, a professor of medicine at Duke University and author of the book "The Biology of Human Survival," said it's plausible Alvarenga survived more than a year adrift

The Pacific's regular squalls would have provided some rainwater for drinking and the birds and turtles that Alvarenga described eating would have given him some

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sustenance and sufficient vitamin C to prevent scurvy, Piantadosi said.

The other vital thing would have been the ability to shelter from the sun, to reduce water loss and prevent other problems, he said. Photographs of the boat show a large blue container that Alvarenga reportedly says he used for shelter.

"It's probably likely that he did survive at sea for 13 months," Piantadosi said.

Alvarenga's story is similar to the tale of three Mexican fishermen rescued by a trawler near the Marshall Islands in 2006 after nine months at sea.

Despite many doubters, Lucio Rendon, Salvador Ordonez and Jesus Vidana stuck to their story, saying they left Mexico's Pacific port of San Blas on Oct. 28, 2005, and they were rescued Aug. 9, 2006, by a Taiwanese fishing ship 5,000 miles (8,000 kilometers) away.

The trio, who were also on a shark-fishing expedition in an open boat similar in size to Alvarenga's, said they survived by taking shelter from the sun under a blanket, eating raw fish and birds and drinking rain water and their urine.

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Associated Press writers Nick Perry in Wellington, New Zealand, and Mark Stevenson in Mexico City contributed to this report.

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