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Fishing Access in the United States

AS FISH AND WILDLIFE PROFESSIONALS WELL KNOW, fishing participation has been steadily declining over the past several years. Common reasons cited by anglers as factors that negatively affect their fishing participation include many social factors, such as work and family obligations and a general lack of time. However, when social factors are separated from resource-based factors (i.e., factors that fish and wildlife agencies can effectively influence), access emerges as a consistently identified resource-based issue among anglers.

The American Sportfishing Association and Responsive Management recently collaborated on a study to gain a comprehensive understanding of the myriad issues concerning access to waters that affect anglers and landowners in the United States, as well as the opinions and attitudes of federal and state agency professionals who make decisions regarding angler access. The study was conducted under a Multi-State Conservation Grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and administered by the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. The study quantified the issues of greatest concern and importance regarding fishing access to guide development and advancement of programs to facilitate and improve access to waters by anglers.



RESPONSIVE MANAGEMENT

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Overview

The ultimate goal of this project was to provide the needed information by examining interaction among the three groups most relevant to fishing access. The study entailed focus groups of those whose work pertains wholly or in part to fishing access, such as state and federal agency employees (hereinafter referred to as “professionals”); focus groups with landowners whose property has water access; focus groups of anglers; a multi-modal survey of professionals; a telephone survey of landowners with water access nationwide; and a telephone survey of anglers nationwide. This article discusses the multi-modal and telephone surveys.

Survey of Professionals

For the survey of professionals, a multi-modal survey approach was used, as such an approach allows each respondent to take the survey at the most convenient time and in the format with which he or she is most comfortable. The completed surveys were entered into Responsive Management’s database by data entry personnel (for professionals who chose the PDF survey option) or were entered by telephone interviewers during the telephone interview (for those professionals who chose to take the survey by telephone) using Questionnaire Programming Language (QPL), which is software designed for telephone surveying and data



collection. Responsive Management obtained 400 completed questionnaires from professionals.

Surveys of Landowners and Anglers

For the surveys of landowners and anglers, telephones were selected as the preferred sampling medium because of

the almost universal ownership of telephones among these groups. Additionally, telephone surveys, relative to mail or Internet surveys, allow for more scientific sampling and data collection for large heterogeneous groups and are more timely and more cost-effective. Telephone surveys also have fewer negative effects on the environment than do mail surveys because of reduced use of paper and reduced energy consumption for delivering and returning the questionnaires.

The landowner sample was obtained from a sample provider that used real estate records of landowners likely to have water on or by their property. From this sample, screener questions in the survey allowed interviewers to identify landowners whose property has water access. Responsive Management obtained a total of 4,017 completed interviews with landowners.

The sample of anglers was obtained from fishing license records, and it was scientifically proportioned to be representative of the United States as a whole (even accounting for the fact that some states with saltwater bodies do not require a fishing license for saltwater fishing). Responsive Management obtained a total of 4,131 completed interviews with anglers.

Some of the main findings of the research include the following:

Public Lands Are Important to Anglers

Whereas access for hunting is highly dependent on private land, access for fishing is highly dependent on public land. The study found that two-thirds of anglers use public land mostly; the overwhelming majority use public land either mostly or equally with private land. While private land access is important, prioritization of strategies must account for the fact that most anglers use public land more than they do private land for gaining access to the water.

Angler Access Is Tied to Boating Access

The survey found that about half of freshwater anglers primarily use a boat while fishing, overwhelmingly private boats. In addition, a large majority of saltwater anglers use a boat to fish their primary body of water. And when anglers were asked what efforts would be effective for making it easier for them to access freshwater/saltwater fishing in general, three of the top six efforts mentioned as being very or somewhat effective referred to boating access. Because angler access is tied to boating access in this way, the importance of public access points and facilities for boating needs to be accounted for in improving angler access.

Anglers Feel Positive About Private Land Access, But Fish and Wildlife Professionals Do Not

Those anglers who access their primary fishing location via private land give mostly positive ratings of access from private land: 70% give a rating of excellent or good, and 28% give a rating of fair or poor; 3% say they don't know. Among professionals, only 12% give a rating of excellent or good regarding access for freshwater fishing from private lands in their state, while 74% give a rating of fair or poor; 12% say they don't know.



The Effect of Landowner Liability on Access Is Viewed Differently by Anglers, Professionals, and Landowners

The surveys of each group found that anglers and professionals are more likely (compared to landowners) to think that a program to reduce landowner liability would be effective at improving access. Compared to the 25% of landowners who think it would be effective, 66% of anglers and 71% of professionals think such a program would be effective. In fact, the survey found that, when it comes to allowing access to their land, landowners are not primarily concerned with liability but with privacy, wanting to personally use the water for fishing (which may tend to limit how much they want others to use the same spot), followed by littering and poor behavior of anglers and other recreationists, and then liability.



Communication With Landowners and Anglers Regarding Access Programs Needs to Be More Effective

Awareness of fishing access programs and resources is low: only 9% of anglers indicated being aware of any fishing access programs or resources. While some anglers who are not aware may not need assistance with access, some might benefit from access programs and/or resources. Landowners are even less aware of any programs that assist landowners in providing access, including any programs that may assist them with problems pertaining to fishing access. Only 3% of landowners indicated being aware of any such programs.

The full report, including further information on respondent characteristics, access characteristics and ratings, strategies for improving access, and demographics, is available at http://www.responsivemanagement.com/download/reports/Fishing_Access_Report.pdf.

Responsive Management would like to thank Gordon Robertson of the American Sportfishing Association for his assistance with this project.

The Comprehensive Access Management Typology

Access for fishing and hunting involves the physical opportunities and locations to fish and hunt as well as sportsmen's perceptions regarding fishing and hunting access issues. The *practical reality* of whether fewer fishing and hunting opportunities exist, and the *perception* that access is becoming a greater problem, represent two separate but related issues. The *reality* of less hunting and fishing access is a *physical* constraint to fishing and hunting, whereas the *perception* that access is becoming more difficult is a *psychological* constraint. Another important factor is whether the area in question is public or private, because the ways to gain access can vary greatly depending on this factor.

To gain a better understanding of access issues, it is helpful to consider the Comprehensive Access Management Typology, which was developed by Responsive Management researchers. The interplay among the typology's factors means that management plans need to take all of them into account. They can be very effective when used as the basis for examining access issues and for developing management plans to enhance access.

Comprehensive Access Management Typology

Physical Aspects of Access

Availability: The actual land available for fishing and hunting.

Accessibility: The ability to get to the land. Problems of accessibility may include public lands blocked by intervening private lands, public lands that are distant from roads and difficult to get to, or roads and trails that are gated or restricted.

Accommodation: Ease of mobility and the experience once sportsmen are on the land. Crowding may be a concern for sportsmen who seek isolated areas for fishing and hunting and prefer not to encounter others. As another example, sportsmen may be able to gain access, but the conditions of roads and trails may make maneuverability difficult, or prohibitions on ATVs may make access to public lands difficult or impossible.

Social/Psychological Aspects of Access

Awareness: Information and knowledge, and sportsmen's awareness of the access options open to them. Lack of knowledge regarding a place to fish or hunt can be just as much of a problem as an actual lack of places to fish or hunt. Awareness also pertains to knowing where information can be found and how to use it.

Assumptions: Sportsmen's perceptions about fishing and hunting opportunities. Perceptions include barriers that actually exist, and barriers that sportsmen believe to exist but really do not.