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Findings Abstracts

Public Awareness and Credibility of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in the Northeastern United States

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Introduction

Assessing levels of public awareness, knowledge, and attitudes toward fish and wildlife agencies is critical to enhancing fish and wildlife agency credibility and implementing successful wildlife management programs. In recent years numerous fish and wildlife agencies across the nation have conducted studies to assess opinions and attitudes toward agencies and their activities. With this kind of information, agencies can, over time with repeated surveys, measure public knowledge and response to their activities as well as their progress in meeting agency goals (Manfredo, Decker, & Duda, 1998). To meet these objectives, the Northeast Conservation Information and Education Association (NCIEA) commissioned a study to measure and examine public awareness and knowledge of fish and wildlife agencies and the public's attitudes toward the credibility of fish and wildlife agencies in the northeastern United States.

Methods

Telephone surveys were completed with residents in all 13 member states of the NCIEA: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and West Virginia. A stratified random sample was purchased from Survey Sampling International. Responsive Management interviewers conducted interviews with state residents ages 18 years and older Monday through Friday from 0900 to 2100, Saturday from 1200 to 1800, and Sunday from 1500 to 1900 in late 2003. A five-callback design was used to maintain sample representativeness, to avoid bias, and to provide equal opportunity for participation. We obtained 5,251 completed telephone interviews in the 13 surveys (response rate = 51%). The sample approximated the demographics of the 13 states in the region. Cumulative findings are reported at a 95% confidence interval with a sampling error of at most ± 1.35 percentage points.

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Results

Consistent with previous research (Responsive Management, 1996, 1997, 2003; McMullin, Duda, & Wright, 2001), northeastern U.S. residents' levels of awareness and knowledge of their state and fish wildlife agency were low. Most respondents did not know which state government agency was most responsible for managing and protecting fish and wildlife in their state; only 16% named the correct agency (ranging from 38% in New Hampshire to 9% in New York). After being informed about the specific agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife in their state, most respondents (78%) indicated that they knew little or nothing about that agency, whereas only 19% knew a great deal or a moderate amount.

Naming the correct state agency most responsible for managing and protecting fish and wildlife was positively correlated with hunting and fishing activities ($p < .001$ in all cases). Hunting and fishing activities included participation in hunting and fishing and the respondent considering himself or herself to be a hunter and an angler. Naming the correct state agency was also positively correlated with other outdoor recreation ($p < .001$ in all cases except where noted: wildlife viewing and birdwatching ($p < .01$), hiking, visiting state or national parks, camping, motorboating, biking, and canoeing or kayaking ($p < .01$)). Naming the correct agency was also related to the respondent thinking that the agency is doing an excellent or good job at enforcing fish and wildlife laws; managing fish and wildlife populations; protecting endangered species; and providing fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing opportunities ($p < .001$ in all cases). Naming the correct state agency was also positively correlated with the respondent being satisfied with the agency. Finally, males were more likely to name the state agency most responsible for managing and protecting fish and wildlife in their state than were females.

Although levels of awareness and knowledge of their state fish and wildlife agency were low, northeastern U.S. residents held more positive than negative opinions about their state agency. Respondents' satisfaction with and perceptions of their state agency were generally positive. Overall, respondents were more satisfied (38%) than dissatisfied (6%) with their state fish and wildlife agency, although a majority answered that they did not know (51%). Those who had contacted their state fish and wildlife agency (20% of respondents) were satisfied with the contact (86% of those who had contacted the agency were satisfied, with 70% very satisfied).

Despite overall low levels of awareness of their state fish and wildlife agency, northeastern residents believed that their state fish and wildlife agency and associated staff have high credibility. The sources of information about fish, wildlife, and outdoor recreation that were considered most credible were those associated with state or federal fish and wildlife agencies or state universities. Sources considered least credible were spokespersons for advocacy organizations, such as environmental or sportsmen's organizations. Sources judged very credible included: biologists with state fish and wildlife agencies (68%); the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (64%); the state's department of environmental protection (57%), the state's fish and wildlife enforcement officer (61%), and professors of environmental science or biology with a state university (55%). Fewer respondents rated the following sources as very credible: spokespersons with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (29%), local environmental organizations (28%), and local sportsmen's organizations (19%).

Managerial Implications

These results were consistent with past survey research showing overall low levels of state fish and wildlife agency awareness among the general population. Such low levels of

awareness can be attributed to a variety of reasons. First, budget constraints limit communications and education within state fish and wildlife agencies as compared to other agency functions. About 3% of state fish and wildlife agencies budgets are spent on information and education (Adams, Stone, & Thomas, 1988). One agency professional recently reported that the current budget for his agency's office of communications was approximately 1.5% of the agency's total annual budget (K. Frailey, personal communication, December 4, 2008).

Second, state fish and wildlife agencies tend to have more presence in rural areas, where fewer state residents reside. Because the land and natural resources managed by agencies are most commonly located in rural areas, agency employees have more contact with and are more visible to residents in less populated areas than with residents in highly populated urban areas. As a result, fewer residents overall are aware of the agency.

Finally, the low awareness may stem from inconsistent identity. Many agencies have multiple logos that may cause confusion or give the impression of the existence of multiple agencies (e.g., one logo for the agency as a whole, a second for the nongame division, a third logo for the watchable wildlife section). Likewise, employees who answer telephone inquiries from the public may also give the appearance of multiple agency identities by naming only the division or section that they represent when answering the phone and not the overarching agency (e.g., inquiries to the same agency are frequently answered as "Wildlife Division" or "Fisheries Division"). This further obfuscates the public's awareness of the specific agency responsible for managing fish and wildlife in their state.

Although state fish and wildlife agencies currently hold high levels of credibility, this credibility is based on low knowledge levels. Without careful attention to communications, this high level of credibility could be lost. Handled correctly, however, this credibility could also be solidified.

Knowing the reasons for low levels of awareness among the public can assist agencies in raising awareness and taking advantage of their high levels of credibility. Awareness can be increased and credibility solidified by increasing communications and education, making communications and agency image more consistent, and using the most credible resources to communicate, which includes the agency.

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