

Abstracts of Presented Wildlife and Fisheries Technical Papers and Posters

Characterizing Recreational Use of Public Hunting and Fishing Lands in Virginia

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Abstract: Wildlife management areas (WMAs) provide opportunity for both traditional hunting and fishing recreation as well as non-consumptive wildlife-related recreation. Although declining participation in traditional wildlife recreation is well documented, little information exists regarding non-traditional stakeholders who recreate on public hunting and fishing lands; non-consumptive use is perceived to be increasing. Our purpose was to characterize recreational users on WMAs owned by the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (VDGIF) and estimate how much use these areas receive. We conducted >4,000 visitor interviews at 10 selected WMAs from September 2009 through August 2010. We obtained information about stakeholders' use (e.g., type of activity, frequency of visits) of the WMA, satisfaction, and opinions regarding common management practices and imposition of a WMA user fee. We developed overall use estimates, by activity, at each of the 10 WMAs. Most (84%) participants possessed a valid Virginia hunting or fishing license; however, a significant minority (16%) of visitors were non-license holders participating in non-consumptive recreational activities, some of which were unrelated to wildlife (e.g., horseback riders, wildflower enthusiasts). Most participants (82%) were satisfied with their experience on the WMA; non-consumptive users expressed greater satisfaction than did traditional users (i.e., hunters and anglers). Most respondents (>70%) supported traditional land management practices such as timber harvesting and prescribed fire. However, almost half (46%) of participants opposed the use of herbicides to manage vegetation on WMAs. When asked who should pay to use WMAs, 52% of respondents indicated that Virginia's WMAs should remain available to all users at no cost; 48% split equally between "everyone should pay" or "only those who do not possess a hunting or fishing license should pay a user fee." However, when prompted with a specific dollar amount between \$5 and \$25, most (>60%) users indicated a willingness to pay that annual fee to use WMAs. A clear understanding of how visitors use public lands and their attitudes toward land management and recreation will help state wildlife agencies like VDGIF continue to make informed management decisions on behalf of their stakeholders.

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