

Missouri's Kids Fishing Program: Getting Them Hooked on the Agency

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Abstract: To acquaint young people with fishing, and to provide an initial fishing opportunity, the Missouri Department of Conservation promoted "Kids Fishing Day" and a series of statewide fishing clinics as an expansion of its urban fishing program. Special emphasis is given to selecting clinic participants with little or no fishing experience, and particularly to disadvantaged or handicapped youngsters. Clinics are limited to 25 children to ensure individualized attention. Community organizations are solicited as co-sponsors to foster local involvement and to provide instructional assistance. The Department stocks fish, provides all fishing equipment, and a variety of fish and fishing literature. Fishing tackle companies provided a variety of items as gifts for all participants. In 1982, more than 2,000 children attended Kids Fishing Day programs, and another 900 attendsd the 36 clinics.

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Although it will be subject to some heated differences of opinion, the great scientific breakthrough of the 1980's is not test-tube babies, the space shuttle, or even cloning. It's kids. The proof is in the marketplace. When a group as influential as the American Fishing Tackle Manufacturers Association (AFTMA) says so, then it's so. From "Take a Kid Fishing" bumper stickers and National Fishing Week promotions to Snoopy Rod & Reel sets, the message is very clear, kids are important to the future of the fishing industry. Kids are also very important to fish and wildlife agencies, today's kids are tomorrow's permit buyers and (it is hoped) agency supporters.

Early Efforts in Missouri

Efforts in Missouri to provide additional fishing opportunities for urban anglers and children date back to 1969 when the Bureau of Sports Fisheries and Wildlife initiated a pilot urban fishing program in St. Louis in coopera-

tion with the Department of Conservation and the city of St. Louis. The major objectives of this program were, and still are, to provide fishing opportunities for urban children and to enhance the fishing success of urban anglers, especially those living in the inner city who cannot readily fish outside their urban environment. In 1973 the Bureau dropped out of the program (its work as catalyst finished) and funding was provided by the Department of Conservation and the city of St. Louis. In 1976, voters in Missouri approved the passage of an additional $\frac{1}{8}$ of 1% sales tax to be used exclusively by the Department of Conservation. With this additional funding, the Department assumed all costs of the urban fishing program in St. Louis. This program was expanded to include Kansas City in 1978 and St. Joseph in 1981. In recent years, other states, including New York (Shupp 1980), Colorado (Powell 1976), and Michigan (Fogle 1978) have proposed or expanded urban fishing programs.

Fishing opportunity in the urban fishing program is provided through a comprehensive fish stocking schedule at neighborhood park lakes. About 10 lakes are stocked in both Kansas City and St. Louis and presently 1 is stocked in St. Joseph. In any 1 year, about 176,000 Kg (80,000 pounds) of fish (including channel catfish, carp, and bullhead) are stocked in urban lakes from May through September. Urban anglers turn out in large numbers and expend a great deal of fishing effort; total effort averaged 4,453 hours per hectare (11,000 hours per acre) on St. Louis urban lakes in 1979 (Alcorn 1981).

In addition to the stocking program, the Department of Conservation also operates a fishing clinic program in cooperation with the local parks and recreation departments in St. Louis and Kansas City. This runs for 8 weeks during the school summer vacation period and is geared to reach children who have never fished. A small lake is kept heavily stocked, and fishing equipment, bait and fishing literature are provided. Two Department of Conservation fishing instructors assist the children at each clinic. About 2,000 children attend clinics each year in St. Louis and Kansas City. The small clinic lakes are also used for therapy fishing in cooperation with local hospitals.

Program Development

Statewide Clinic Expansion

Because of the success and favorable publicity surrounding the urban program, and an increasing number of requests to provide fish for local fishing events, the Division of Fisheries developed plans in 1981 for an initial series of fishing clinics, 1 in each of 9 fisheries management districts. To take advantage of the manpower associated with local community organizations and agencies, the statewide program promoted the idea of co-sponsors to

assist with individual clinics. Groups such as Lions clubs, Optimists and Jaycees, to name a few, are contacted by Department of Conservation personnel and asked to co-sponsor a fishing clinic in their local community. Children chosen for clinics are 12 years of age and under, with special emphasis given to picking those with little or no fishing experience, and particularly to disadvantaged or handicapped children who have little opportunity to go fishing. The responsibility of the co-sponsor is to provide 25 children with transportation to the site, a sack lunch and supervision during the clinic. The Department of Conservation makes arrangements for a suitable lake (1.23 hectare [$\frac{1}{2}$ acre] or smaller), stocks fish (200 hybrid sunfish, 100 channel catfish), provides all fishing equipment, bait, fish stringers, stringer identification tags, fish sacks, and a variety of fish and fishing literature.

Program Awareness

To gain support for the expanded program and to inform the public of our new service, the Department of Conservation designated a statewide "Kids Fishing Day" as a kickoff to the clinic program. Current Governor Christopher S. Bond endorsed the event in a statewide news release to all newspapers, radio, and TV stations. In addition, 60,000 bumper stickers with the slogan "Kids Fishing—It's Catching On" were made available for statewide distribution. To further emphasize children fishing, the Department waived daily fishing fees for children 12 and under for this 1 day at 6 heavily used public fishing areas. These included our 2 major urban wildlife areas in Kansas City and St. Louis and the Department's 4 trout parks. At the Kansas City and St. Louis areas, heavily stocked, previously unfished channel catfish lakes were opened for children only. At trout parks, members of local trout fishermen's organizations acted as instructors and loaned personal equipment to children interested in trout fishing. Demonstrations of fishing skills, fly tying, and fishing films were also made available at the areas. Children were provided with free "Kids Fishing Day" tags, fish stringers, fish sacks, and fishing literature. The Zebco Corporation provided free literature and reel repair service at several areas for this event.

Fishing Day Kickoff and Clinics - 1981

More than 1,400 kids participated in the fishing day program at the 6 selected areas. Surprisingly, about 60% took advantage of free fishing at 1 of the 4 trout parks. In this regard, the fee elimination enabled several youngsters to become acquainted with trout fishing. Parents who might not normally spend the \$1.50 for a daily trout tag were more than willing to allow their children to participate with the free daily tag. Overall fishing success for children was good, and at the previously unfished catfish lakes, success was

outstanding. For example, at the James A. Reed Memorial Wildlife Area in Kansas City, 409 kids caught 850 catfish with an average size of 1.4 kg (3 pounds), and 1,500 bullhead averaging over 0.5 kg (1 pound) each. Area managers noted no special problems and trout park managers commented that, while no special area for kids was established at the trout parks, adult trout anglers were not upset by the influx of novice fly casters.

Clinics were initially scheduled to begin the same weekend as "Kids Fishing Day" (22 August), but co-sponsors' schedules necessitated some additional flexibility. The 9 clinics scheduled for 1981 ran from 29 July to 13 September on weekends. Co-sponsors provided the bulk of supervision for participants with a ratio of 1 adult per 2 kids considered optimal. For physically or mentally handicapped kids, a 1 on 1 ratio was maintained. Department of Conservation personnel assisted at all clinics though the program was designed so that agency personnel involvement on the clinic date was not necessary.

Local news media were informed of the clinics and they received excellent news exposure. In all, 185 children with no previous fishing experience were given an opportunity to catch fish, and they did.

1982 Clinic Program

Because of the success of the pilot program in 1981, the number for 1982 was increased to 36. For better distribution, district personnel were asked to schedule each clinic for a different town and county. Little additional effort was needed to secure co-sponsors for all clinics thanks to increased public awareness and positive publicity in 1981. In fact, we have more requests than we can honor. All of the 1981 co-sponsors signed up for 1982 as further evidence of the program's popularity. In addition to the items provided by the Department, fishing tackle manufacturers provided a wide variety of items as gifts for all clinic participants. As in 1981, the expanded clinic season will begin with "Kids Fishing Day" with the same format used previously. With 1 year of experience behind us and with added publicity we expected, and achieved, a doubling of attendance at the fishing day programs. Plans have already been formulated to increase the number of clinics to 58 for 1983, with the eventual goal of a minimum of 1 clinic per county (114) by 1985. Hatchery production has already been scheduled to produce the hybrid sunfish and catfish required for the increased number of clinics.

Clinic Benefits

As with any program, there are benefits to a variety of participants. For the children, the obvious benefit is the chance to go fishing, with an outstand-

ing chance of actually catching a fish. Unlike many recreational pursuits, fishing is not the easiest sport for children to participate in. Even though the basic equipment may be available, most children still need someone to take them fishing and teach them the necessary skills. Much evidence exists that individuals maintain the outdoor recreation activity interests learned in childhood (Yoesting and Burkhead 1973), thus it is in a fish and wildlife agency's best interests to promote fishing and hunting activities. The children who participated in this program will grow up remembering that the Missouri Department of Conservation took them on their first fishing trip.

Co-sponsors benefit by solidifying their reputation in the local community, and by establishing a mutually supportive relationship with the Department of Conservation. Other groups, such as the fishing tackle industry (state sales representatives in particular) are quick to associate with any fishing program and happily support the agency in this regard. They often become the source for additional instructional materials and free fishing equipment for clinic participants. Even more importantly, they begin to increase their own fishing awareness programs thus magnifying the overall agency efforts.

Of course, the Missouri Department of Conservation benefits from the positive publicity generated throughout the state. Fishing clinic activities serve to reinforce our public service image, especially in the minds of parents statewide. Just as important, local clinics bring the Department into the community, demonstrating our desire to serve public needs as outlined in the Design for Conservation, the Department's blueprint for conservation activities, which was voted on and passed in 1976.

While I have mentioned benefits, I have not said anything about costs. Naturally there are costs; every program costs. But in the Fisheries Division we cannot think of any program which pays greater dividends. Kids – you can take them to the bank!

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