

Accommodating a Diverse Constituency: A Case for Tournament Anglers¹

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Abstract: As anglers become more specialized in their pursuits, management agencies need to develop specialized programs to accommodate the needs and desires of these groups to keep them as active participants and license buyers. Black bass (*Micropterus* spp.) tournament anglers are among a state fishery agency's constituents. To accommodate this group, regulation exemptions could be granted that allow tournament contestants to temporarily retain more than their legal daily creel limit or possess fish within a restricted slot length limit until after the weigh-in. I provide examples from 3 state agencies that considered, but did not provide tournament exemptions, and 2 agencies that developed successful exemption programs. Positive aspects of granting exemptions include regulatory control that could reduce user conflicts, educational opportunities leading to increased survival of released fish, improved communications with tournament organizations, and increased economic benefits accrued to local communities from tournament activities. These benefits must be weighed against possible increased mortality of caught bass that might compromise management efforts, agency administrative and personnel costs, and the objections from non-tournament anglers of granting a small portion of the constituency special privileges.

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Human dimensions research in fisheries has shown that there is a great deal of diversity among anglers and they have become more specialized in the species they pursue and how they pursue them. Accommodating diversity is a challenge facing fishery managers across the country. Schafer (1969) studied the characteristics of campers and concluded that the "average" camper does not exist; the same conclusion would seem applicable to anglers. Agencies, however, still design most of their management programs to provide products and services for the average angler (Jakus et al. 1996, Wilde et al. 1996). Management programs aimed at average users are compromises that may not fully satisfy the many segments within an agency's

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constituency. Approaches that may be seen as favoring special interest groups are often avoided.

The question then becomes, how does an agency develop programs to accommodate the needs of a single group without alienating others within their constituency? The following discussion explores the role of regulations in balancing resource protection with user needs and demands. I discuss the possibilities of granting temporary exemptions from certain regulations, if such actions do not threaten the resource, as an example of how agencies could accommodate bass tournament anglers.

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Tournaments and Tournament Anglers

Tournament anglers have been studied to determine their demographics, motivations, expectations, and satisfactions (King et al. 1979, Falk et al. 1989, Ditton 1996, Wilde et al. 1998). Although they typically make up <20% of fishing license buyers (Summers 1990, Watson 1993, Wilde et al. 1998), bass tournament anglers are perhaps the most visible, vocal, and controversial user group in freshwater fishing, and participation in tournaments is growing (Shupp 1979, Duttweiler 1985, Schramm et al. 1991a, Gilliland 1996). The influence of this group is being felt by management agencies across the southeast (Dean 1996, Shupp 1996), as well as outside traditional southern black bass fishing circles (Kumar 1995, Lamb 1996, Waddington and Laughland 1996). This group is demanding more from managers and the resource.

There are real and perceived biological problems with tournament bass fishing. While concern about over-exploitation of fish stocks has diminished because of catch-and-release practices, delayed mortality of fish released after weigh-in is an often-cited problem (Schramm et al. 1985, 1987; Weathers and Newman 1997). Kwak and Henry (1995) reported that tournament-related mortality was small relative to other causes of mortality and therefore had little negative impact on the population. However, Wilde (1998) suggested that the average tournament-related mortality of 26%–28% among studies conducted in the 1980s and 1990s may have negative population-level effects. This is more likely when tournament activity makes up a substantial portion of the bass fishing effort (Dolman 1991, Hulon et al. 1992). Meals and Miranda (1994) found that larger bass had higher mortality rates, giving rise to speculation that tournament mortality may be reducing numbers of older, larger fish and causing subtle changes in the size and age structure of populations. Mathematical models developed by Hayes et al. (1995) support this hypothesis and indicate that annual population growth of 20%–30% may offset tournament-related mortality, but size structure will degrade before population depletion is evident.

Displacement or stockpiling of fish released after weigh-in is another worry (Schramm et al. 1991a, Cofer 1995). On many popular tournament reservoirs, the majority of weigh-ins occur at a selected few boat ramps or marinas, concentrating

released fish in those areas (P. Greenwood, Tournament Anglers Guild, pers. commun.). Fish that are caught and transported to a central weigh-in site are slow to disperse and may be subjected to more intense competition for suitable habitat and forage (Stang et al. 1996). Tournament release sites are also regularly fished by non-tournament, harvest-oriented anglers following large events (author, unpubl. data). Substantial catch of tournament-released fish may inflate harvest above levels that would be seen if released fish were redistributed throughout the lake or reservoir.

While management agencies receive complaints from angry local anglers and property owners about fish kills near tournament release sites, many problems associated with bass tournaments represent social issues and user conflicts. Tournament competitors are not held in high regard by non-tournament anglers (Wilde et al. 1998) and crowded access areas, filled parking lots, and arrogant or discourteous boaters contribute to tournament angling's poor public image (Shupp 1979), Duttweiler 1985, Schramm et al. 1991*b*). Non-tournament anglers object to tournament organizers profiting from a public resource without paying for the privilege (Schupp 1979, Sasser 1992). Noble and Jones (1993) suggested that "without regulation, this commercial use (tournaments) of public fisheries resources will continue to be a source of conflict with the sport-fishing public." In 1990, only 19 state fishery management agencies required tournament permits or had specific tournament-related regulations and, of these, only 3 were southeastern states (Schramm et al. 1991*a*).

Accommodating Tournament Anglers

Many waters are currently managed with customized length and creel limits designed to reduce overcrowded fish populations, reduce mortality, increase recruitment, improve angling quality, or provide greater trophy fishing opportunities (Noble and Jones 1993). To many tournament anglers and organizers, these limits make the waters undesirable as tournament sites because they conflict with standardized contest rules. Slot length limits, especially, prevent tournament anglers from keeping fish that are of legal length in other waters. Organizers contend that by allowing them to use the same length and creel limit on all waters, contestants can better understand and follow tournament rules. There would be fewer disagreements over length measurements, and handling of fish would be reduced at the weigh-in resulting in returning fish to the water faster, thereby increasing survival (C. Woods, Champion Tournament Trail, pers. commun.).

Paper tournaments, where fish are measured, lengths recorded, and the fish released immediately, have been suggested as alternatives to traditional weigh-ins, precluding the need for exemptions (Willis and Hartmann 1986). However, many tournament contestants object to this format because there is no practical method for verifying lengths unless the event is a random draw-for-partner contest. Unlike 2-person team or buddy tournaments, this type of event is used in only a small percentage of events in most states (Gilliland 1994, Ostrand et al. 1998). Tournament directors object to paper tournaments because the sponsors from whom they have solicited money and merchandise prizes want a large crowd of potential customers to see their advertisements at the

weigh-in. And few spectators come to weigh-ins if anglers bring only slips of paper to the scales instead of fish (J. Morton, Sport Bass Assoc., pers. commun.).

Human dimension research suggests accommodating the specialists with products or services that will make their recreational experience more enjoyable, and then redirecting less-specialized participants to alternative resources (Hendee 1974, Hahn 1991). This should keep the specialists active in the sport while the less-specialized anglers' needs are met because they can be satisfied with more diverse experiences. In applying this to bass tournament anglers, an agency might grant contestants temporary exemptions from the creel or length limit restrictions that interfere with standardized tournament rules. Such exemptions would allow anglers to possess a certain number of fish within a slot length limit or under a minimum length limit until the weigh-in, after which all fish would be released back into the water alive. Tournament organizers and contestants would be required to follow a strict set of fish care and weigh-in guidelines and exemptions might only be issued in cooler months to ensure maximum survival of released fish.

Precedents for providing such special products, services, or programs already exist. Examples can be found in fly-fishing or artificial lure-only areas for brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) to accommodate "purists" (Patterson 1990) or catch-and-release-only regulations on black bass for trophy anglers (Ott and Webb 1996). While these regulations were designed with a biological intent to protect certain sizes of fish and/or enhance catch rates, one of their goals is to provide exceptional experiences for the select group(s) of anglers that are willing to participate under the special rules. Gear restrictions are another commonly used management technique that discriminates by angler specialization. Blue catfish (*Ictalurus furcatus*) or flathead catfish (*Pylodictis olivaris*) anglers are allowed in many states to hand-fish and use spear guns or grab-hooks, while the generally less-specialized channel catfish (*I. punctatus*) anglers (Wilde and Riechers 1994) must use hook-and-line techniques. However, these same hand-fishing or spear gun anglers must also abide by smaller creel limits than their hook-and-line counterparts on the same waters. Another example of a differential regulation occurs in states where anglers fishing in private ponds are exempted from licensing requirements (Dunham 1997). No-wake or no-ski zones on small waters or portions of large reservoirs are used for safety reasons, but can also be used to allocate resources based on interests among a diverse boater constituency (Jones 1996).

An informal telephone survey of 22 fishery management agencies, both within and outside the southeast, indicated that many (77%) had received requests for regulation waivers or exemptions from tournament organizations (author, unpubl. data). Only 5 states studied the feasibility of granting such exemptions in detail and only 2 of these have implemented exemption programs.

Case Histories

In 1994 the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation (ODWC) was approached by tournament organizations to provide exemptions from slot length limits.

A proposal was prepared by ODWC biologists that included a list of procedures tournament organizations would have to follow to qualify for an exemption. These included procedures that would allow law enforcement personnel to identify tournament contestants, specifications for boat live wells and aeration systems, standards for weigh-in equipment and fish handling procedures, and would have restricted tournament hours during summer events. This proposal was circulated among several major tournament organizations. They agreed that the requirements, although quite strict, were fair and they wished to pursue the matter further. The proposal was then discussed at length among ODWC fishery biologists and law enforcement personnel. Many biologists felt that the agency should not be catering to small, vocal groups and that tournament anglers did not deserve additional consideration. Concerns were expressed over agency involvement, time, and manpower requirements. Law enforcement personnel voiced strong concerns about enforceability and accountability. Opposition within the ODWC staff was strong enough that administrators decided to put the proposal before anglers at upcoming public hearings as an "information-only" item. This approach allowed discussion and public input without requiring the proposal to be forwarded to the Oklahoma Wildlife Conservation Commission for inclusion in the year's suite of regulation changes. The proposal, including an extensive list of requirements for permits, was explained to attendees at 17 public hearings throughout the state. Public hearing participants rejected the proposal by a 2:1 margin and the issue was dropped from further consideration. Tournament organizations have not, as yet, requested that the issue be revisited.

Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) faced a similar situation in 1994. Tournament organizers requested permission to possess bass within slot length limits during tournaments (K. Kurzawski, TPWD, pers. commun.). Agency fishery biologists were divided on the issue but most were against implementing such a plan. As in Oklahoma, law enforcement personnel were concerned about enforcement. When the proposal was reviewed by citizen members of the Freshwater Fishery Advisory Board, they too were divided on the plan (Lamb 1995). Although 3 of 5 board members favored exemptions, support was contingent upon a 2-year evaluation of the logistics of implementation, magnitude of delayed mortality, and reaction of non-tournament anglers. Questions were raised as to the Department's authority to provide temporary exemptions to state law and the agency's legal staff was asked to provide additional input. The measure was not passed on to public hearings or to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission for consideration; however, administrators agreed to continue to take and evaluate input on the proposal from staff and the angling public before bringing the idea up for discussion at a later date.

Kansas tournament organizers, many of whom had previously used paper tournaments as alternatives to traditional weigh-in procedures (Willis and Hartmann 1986), asked administrators with the Kansas Wildlife and Parks Department for exemptions to slot length limits. In an angler opinion telephone survey commissioned by the agency, a majority of resident anglers surveyed, including those largemouth bass (*M. salmoides*) anglers that belonged to and those that did not belong to sport or conservation organizations (clubs), disagreed with the statement "fishing tournaments for

largemouth bass that require live release should not have to follow the (statewide) 440 mm length limit" (M. Burlingame, Kans. Coop. Fish and Wildl. Res. Unit, pers. commun.). News releases and information on survey results were provided to tournament organizations and agency officials have not pursued the issue further.

The most highly publicized example of an agency providing tournament exemptions comes from Florida. In 1992 the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (FGFFC) instituted statewide 356-mm/5 largemouth bass per person length and daily creel limits of which only 1 fish could be >560 mm long. Tournament organizations, including several national circuits, voiced their opposition saying that this rule made it difficult to conduct their events in Florida (R. Watson, FGFFC, pers. commun.). They requested that the agency give temporary exemptions to tournaments. When agency officials said they had neither the funding nor the personnel to administer an exemption program, tournament groups led by the Florida Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) Federation went to their elected officials for help. The Florida legislature appropriated funds and directed the FGFFC to develop a 3-year study of bass tournaments (Watson 1993). The FGFFC was authorized to establish rules to permit tournaments, grant exemptions to the 1-bass-over-560 mm rule, and conduct research into tournament-related issues such as delayed mortality and bass displacement. A 3-person Tournament Monitoring Team was established and public meetings were held to explain the program to anglers across the state. Permitted tournaments were required to follow a strict set of fish handling guidelines, release all fish after weigh-in, and provide summary data to the monitoring team (Watson 1993). This action by the legislature and the agency on behalf of tournament anglers received little opposition at public hearings (R. Wattendorf, FGFFC, pers. commun.). The program has been operating for 3 years and many agency biologists that were once opposed to offering exemptions are now strong proponents (W. Porak, FGFFC, pers. commun.). They cite increased communications between agency personnel and tournament organizers as a key benefit derived from the exemption program.

Bass tournament organizers in California went to the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG) in the early 1970s requesting that a regulatory system be developed to reduce scheduling conflicts among organizations, including a permitting process with regulations to insure that all bass caught in tournaments must be released alive insofar as possible (D. Lee, CDFG, pers. commun.). In 1975 the permitting and reporting systems were begun and modified in 1988 to include requirements for fish care and weigh-in procedures (Lee et al. 1993). Since 1982, a number of reservoirs across California have been managed with 305- to 381-mm slot or other increased length limit regulations. In 1994, tournament groups came to the CDFG asking for exemptions from these regulations. After a series of statewide public meetings and review by the California Fish and Game Commission, fishing contest regulations were changed to provide exemptions to tournament organizations holding contests on waters with minimum length limits >305 mm, slot length limits, or reduced creel limits (CDFG 1996). This exemption was only considered for a specific body of water during the 5-year period following implementation of an increased

minimum or slot length limit. After the 5-year exemption period, tournament organizations had to modify their procedures to comply with existing regulations. Inclusion of exemptions in the permitting system was considered only after agency personnel were convinced that there would be little or no harm to the resource (I. Paulsen, CDFG, pers. commun.). Good working relations between tournament organizations and the state management agency and the generally good public image that bass tournaments have in California resulted in little opposition from non-tournament anglers during public meetings. Another factor in reducing public concern may have been the temporary nature of the exemptions and the fact that tournaments were required to change their operating procedures within 5 years to comply with the same regulations as other anglers. Tournament organizations have been applying for and receiving temporary exemptions from special regulations on many California reservoirs for 4 years.

Disadvantages of Accommodating Tournament Anglers

Agency personnel in each of these states were concerned about the reaction of non-tournament anglers to concessions given to special interest groups (Table 1). Although many tournament directors and participants do not acknowledge it, tournament angling is not held in high regard by many anglers (Wilde et al. 1998). Surveys in Oklahoma have shown that >65% of fishing license buyers favor regulating bass tournaments (Summers 1990, 1995). Wilde et al. (1998) reported that 40% of Texas black bass anglers that do not participate in tournaments believed that most tournament-released fish do not survive and 50% of all black bass anglers believed that tournaments harm their fishing enjoyment.

Table 1. Positive and negative aspects of developing programs that provide temporary exemptions from certain fishing regulations to tournament anglers as identified by state fishery management agency personnel in California, Florida, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Positive	Negative
Additional agency regulatory control: Reduce user conflicts Data collection	Reaction from non-tournament anglers: Do not concede to special interests Profit from public resource
Garners agency support from tournaments: Support for future regulation changes Creates potential political allies	Law enforcement concerns: Identification of exempt contestants Dual Regulations Accountability
Economic benefits: Possible agency funding source Positive local economic impacts	Biological concerns: Mortality may compromise management
Improved communication channels: Conservation awareness	Expense to agency for administration: Limited budgets
Reduced mortality of released fish: Required weigh-in procedures Satisfied customers	Personnel time requirements: Administration and monitoring Dissatisfied customers

Law enforcement personnel expressed concern over being able to easily identify contestants in exempted tournaments and the problems of explaining and enforcing 2 different regulations on the same water on a given day (D. Maxwell, ODWC, pers. commun.). There was also concern over accountability. If the angling public accepts exemptions, they have a right to expect tournament organizations to follow the required procedures. Agency personnel might be required for on-site observation. Administrators were concerned about demands that an exemption or permitting system would have on personnel time and agency budgets. In many states in the southeast it is common to see more than 1,000 tournaments per year with >200 on individual reservoirs (Schramm et al. 1991a, Gilliland 1997). Penalties or fines could be levied against tournament organizations or participating anglers that do not follow the rules. But in many states, legislative action is required for setting fees and fines. Unfortunately, when the task of setting regulations is thrown into the political arena, segments of the agency's constituency and the resource may not be equally represented.

The possibility of increased bass mortality during and after tournaments operating with regulation exemptions caused great concern among the biologists in each of the states that examined this issue. Adding to the already volatile discussion concerning tournament-related mortality (Gilliland 1996, Wilde 1998), the potential for additional bass mortality exists from tournaments operating with regulation exemptions. While mortality can be reduced by following recommended fish handling and weigh-in procedures (Schramm and Heidinger 1988, Kwak and Henry 1995, Gilliland 1997, Weathers and Newman 1997), some mortality of released fish will occur (Schramm et al. 1985, Meals and Miranda 1994, Wilde 1998). If the mortality of fish that would otherwise have been released immediately is high, and a significant number of tournaments receive exemptions on a given body of water, the effectiveness of the length limit regulation may be compromised.

Advantages of Accommodating Tournament Anglers

Exemption programs would require tournament organizations to apply for permits, thus allowing the agency more regulatory control over numbers, sizes and locations of contests (Table 1). This would be especially important in protecting popular, high-profile fisheries from overfishing. It could also help reduce conflicts with other user groups, spread fishing pressure among different waters and allow collection of useful data for management purposes (Farman et al. 1982, Chapman and Fish 1983, Dolman 1991, Reeves and McHugh 1992, Gilliland 1996). A data base of tournament organizations would give the agency access to an organized work force when volunteers are needed for habitat enhancement, youth education, or other programs (Boyer and Miller 1997).

Bass tournament fishing and the related media exposure were driving forces behind the increased popularity of sport fishing and the expansion of the fishing boat and tackle industry that started in the late 1960s (Shupp 1979). This expansion resulted in increased agency revenues from license sales and Federal excise taxes on fishing tackle, equipment, and marine fuels (Fed. Aid in Sport Fish Restor. Program).

Although tournament anglers represent a minority among an agency's constituents and contribute a proportionately smaller amount to agency budgets through fishing license fees than do non-tournament anglers, studies have shown that the more specialized anglers become, the more they are willing to spend on their sport (Ditton et al. 1990). While exact industry figures are confidential, on a per capita basis it is likely that tournament anglers contribute more to the Aquatic Resources Trust Fund through their purchases than do non-tournament anglers. The 1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-associated Recreation (U.S. Dep. Int. and U.S. Dep. Commerce 1996) showed the average freshwater angler spent \$28 per trip while Texas bass anglers spent an average of \$91 per trip (R. Ditton, Texas A&M Univ., pers. commun.). Considering that tournament bass anglers fish more frequently, give more attention to equipment and the use of technology, and are more likely to own specialized bass boats, etc. (Ditton et al. 1990, Wilde and Ditton 1994), they probably spend even more on their sport than the average bass angler.

Local economies also benefit from tournaments. Many areas adjacent to reservoirs that have become top tournament destinations have seen tremendous growth in the form of motels, restaurants, gasoline and convenience stores, jobs, and income for local citizens (Bryan 1985). Indeed, in Oklahoma, when a slot length limit was imposed on a popular tournament reservoir and tournament activity dropped 69%, local businesses called for repeal of the regulation, and threatened to force legislative action that would bring tournaments back (Gilliland 1994). A California community also recognized the economic impact that these events had on their city. When a slot length limit regulation was imposed by CDFG on a nearby reservoir, city officials persuaded state legislators to provide a permanent exemption from the regulation for tournament organizations that visited that reservoir (I. Paulsen, CDFG, pers. commun.).

Another justification for accommodating tournament anglers is that participants generally have positive attitudes toward agency management efforts (Wilde and Ditton 1991, Jakus et al. 1996). Granting temporary regulation exemptions could make these groups more open to other innovative management techniques and different length/creel regulations in the future when biologists deem them necessary to improve fishing quality.

Granting regulation exemptions could help strengthen bonds between agencies and tournament organizations, building trust and improving agency credibility. Bass tournament anglers are generally well educated and well read (U.S. Dep. Int. and U.S. Dep. Commerce 1991, Waddington and Laughland 1996). A proliferation of fishing publications targeting tournament anglers keeps them informed on the latest tackle and techniques. In recent years, publishers have been focusing more on conservation issues to educate and inform readers. Popular magazines and tabloids such as *Bassin'*, *BassMaster*, *The In-Fisherman*, *North American Fisherman*, *Outdoor Life*, and *B.A.S.S. Times* have sections devoted to environmental issues where science is translated into laymen's terms. A communication network has developed among tournament groups. In many states, tournament councils or associations of directors have been formed to facilitate cooperation and communication (D. Hanshaw,

Okla. Tournament Directors Assoc., pers. commun.). At the national level, organizations such as the B.A.S.S. Federation provide interstate connections among like-minded groups. These organizations make excellent vehicles for agencies to use in communicating with anglers. Organized, informed angler groups can be powerful political allies. Although tournament anglers are often characterized as “attack dogs” when regulations that they disagree with are proposed, they can also be “watch dogs” looking out for agency and resource interests in the political arena (Dean 1996, 1997).

The concept of catch-and-release was promoted by B.A.S.S. in the early 1970s and has been the guiding principle for tournament groups (Schramm et al. 1991a, Manns 1992). With the advent of the “Don’t Kill Your Catch” philosophy, tournament anglers encouraged boat manufacturers to include live wells into modern fishing boat design and upgrade aeration systems to keep fish healthy for live release (F. Wood, Ranger Boat Co., pers. commun.). The competitive nature of tournament anglers is often cited as the basis of concern about boating safety and courtesy during tournaments. But painting all tournament anglers with a broad brush as reckless boaters may be unfair. Bass tournaments were the first boating events to require the use of life vests and engine kill-switches (Tucker 1986). The boating industry has responded to bass tournament angler demands for quieter, more fuel-efficient outboards; safer and more responsive steering systems; level and upright boat flotation; and advanced marine electronics and navigation devices that all anglers can now use to make their fishing more productive and enjoyable. While some would argue that these advances would have been developed without tournament fishing, just as auto racing sped the development of many automotive products, bass tournament fishing sped developments in the tackle and boating industry.

Marketing and Selling Exemption Programs

Just as agencies should be pro-active in recognizing and targeting untapped segments of the public to which they can market their products and services, they should also recognize that current customers need to be accommodated to enhance their angling experiences. Marketing involves finding out what those customers want and need, then selling it to them. Angler surveys, forums, and focus groups can help determine what bass tournament anglers want from the agency. If regulation exemptions are found to be an appropriate product, the positive and negative aspects of such programs must be weighed, balancing social gains or losses and constituent satisfaction with science-based concern for the resource.

Non-tournament anglers must then be convinced that the organizations receiving the exemptions are worthy of special treatment. Issuing exemptions only during cooler seasons and requirements that tournaments follow strict fish handling and weigh-in guidelines help address biological concerns (Lee et al. 1993). Special fees may answer the demands from other users that tournament organizations “give something back” for use of public resources and address issues of fairness and equity in the allocation of resources (Loomis and Ditton 1993, Ditton 1996). Fees may also help offset agency expenses involved in administering and monitoring such programs.

Tournament organizations must also be actively involved in the selling process by convincing the public that they deserve exemptions through development of a more positive public image. Community service programs that educate and introduce children, women and non-anglers to the sport are part of many tournament organizations' mission. Working with agency education specialists and fishery managers, tournament groups could expand those programs to promote fishing as a family-oriented, life-long sport that depends on a clean and healthy environment. Joint efforts among agencies, industry, and tournament organizations would help pass the legacy of fishing to the younger generation.

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