

The Role of the Media in Promoting the Angling Experience

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Abstract: Angling media outlets join fishery management agencies, tourism promoters, and the fishing tackle industry in having a vested interest in maintaining or increasing angling participation. Media outlets, including print, television, videotape, radio, and the Internet, need an audience to buy their services, and the market is increasingly competitive. To promote angling, and at the same time succeed financially, various media must simultaneously appeal to specialized groups of anglers by providing up-to-date and technically accurate information, recruit non-anglers to the sport of fishing, and encourage increased participation and specialization among anglers. One role of the angling media is to act as an intermediary between anglers and fisheries management agencies, angling experts, and the fishing tackle industry. Communication, coordination, and mutual understanding of roles will enhance this process and keep angling among the foremost outdoor experiences.

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I'm pleased to be part of this distinguished panel and to have an opportunity to present some thoughts on the role of the media in promoting the angling experience. According to classical definition, the word "media" gains true meaning only as the plural form of medium, the state of being in the middle. Media are instruments of communications, therefore, between those who have a message and the intended audience. The media's intermediate role is critical to the process of communications of all sorts, including those among the angling public, fishing industry, and fishery management.

I hope everyone present would agree that angling is a very healthy activity. It refreshes the soul and nourishes the body. And for those of us in fishery management or in the fishing industry, fishing keeps us employed. Human interactions with fish and other wild creatures foster an innate appreciation of them as fascinating organisms, and foster a recognition of their habitat needs. Such appreciation makes anglers, hunters, and non-consumptive users support many conservation measures politically, financially, and socially.

Members of this panel represent the fishing tackle industry, public fishery management, research, and the media. Our efforts all are intertwined, and successes and

failures in any realm affect us all. The media's need for audiences parallels the need of fishery managers for angling clients to take advantage of fishing opportunities and the need of the tackle industry for consumers. But while fishery managers often pursue long-term biological goals, media and the tackle industry need to continually provide new information, new products, and commodities packaged in a new way to avoid boredom among clients and loss of sales. Yet in media or private corporations, long-term corporate goals provide a solid foundation that sometimes contrasts with ad campaigns, new product releases, or publication schedules.

As Mark Duda has described, the proportion of the population that fishes has declined and demographic factors don't promise a reversal of this trend. In some states, numbers of licensed anglers have declined rather steadily over the last 2 decades. That isn't true everywhere, however, and the 1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation reports that the number of anglers in 1996 did not show any statistically significant decline since the previous survey 5 years earlier (USFWS 1997). Yet as the human population grows, a static number of anglers becomes a shrinking special interest group. The 1996 survey also shows that anglers fished more often and spent more money fishing than previously. This information suggests that the level of avidity has risen; that is, a larger proportion of folks that buy a license consider angling an important part of their lives than ever before. What we do see is a decline in casual anglers, those who fish infrequently and don't spend much money on tackle or fishing trips. They may fail to fish if other activities require their time or fishing access isn't easily available.

And even more importantly, we see a decline in the proportion of kids who fish, seemingly attributable to many social factors, including an increasingly urban population with accompanying loss of proximity to good fishing sites and loss of social and family networks involving fishing. We need to reverse this trend, for the future of the fishing media, fishing tackle industry, and fishery management frameworks. If we don't, we not only lose consumers but also lose supporters of conservation and environmental quality in the public realm.

I am personally most familiar with the avid group of anglers, as I spend nearly 100 days per year fishing, and my employer, *In-Fisherman* magazine, targets avid anglers. Our subscribers purchased an average of \$1,600 worth of fishing equipment last year, and spent over \$1,000 on fishing trips. They own an average of 15 rods and reels per household and 23% competed in a fishing tournament. Our own subscription levels have remained rather constant over the last decade, and a quick look at demographics may show why. Since 1990, mean subscriber age has increased from 41 to 48, while female proportion has remained at 2 percent. Company managers are content to target this small segment of the whole angling population, yet also are concerned that it's an aging segment, with relatively few recruits. And we recognize that the health of the sport as a whole demands that we, who are involved in fishing philosophically and financially, find ways to grow the sport.

I am sometimes asked about the effects of the trend toward avidity on fishery management and the fishing tackle industry. Avid anglers spend much of their discretionary income on fishing equipment, boats, and travel expenses. Through the

Wallop-Breaux program, these purchases fund fishery management activities in the states, boosting staffs and budgets of management agencies. Part of these funds go to aquatic education which is being used in many areas to acquaint youth with fishing opportunities.

Angler surveys also generally show that this most avid group of anglers, while fishing frequently and catching more fish than casual anglers, is more inclined to release a major portion of their catch, and also tends to be more supportive of increased harvest restrictions and other fishery management activities. Many groups composed of such anglers, including Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.) Federation Clubs, Muskies Inc., Trout Unlimited, and other local organizations have provided political, financial, and manpower support for fishery management.

Avid anglers are great, but we need to start novice anglers up the ladder to avidity. Toward this end, the role of the media, as well as the roles of industry and fishery management, are to cater both to avid specialized anglers and to encourage recruitment of novice anglers. This isn't easy, and maybe it is even a dichotomy, for specialized anglers dwell on the technical aspects of tackle, technology, and even the intricacies of fishery management, the same stuff that may baffle and disinterest newcomers to the sport. Tackle companies, too, must provide equipment for the 2 ends of the continuum of specialization and those lying somewhere in-between. And to publicize this range of products, they communicate directly with consumers or through the media.

Consider that each media outlet may have a relatively limited target audience. For example, *In-Fisherman* magazine targets avid anglers who pursue a variety of fish, and *Bassmaster* magazine focuses only on black bass anglers. To reach a broad audience, then, a range of media outlets must carry the message that fishing is fun and easy to become involved in. The continuum of angler avidity from novice to specialized expert also presents challenges to fishery managers. You too, need to provide special fishing opportunities that avid anglers seek by implementing new management strategies, and also provide opportunities for shore bound urban anglers who may fish primarily for food.

Avid anglers may not be eager to recruit new anglers to the fraternity. When surveys ask anglers about their experiences or attitudes, they often complain that fishing areas are too crowded already. The quality of their experience has declined due to fishing pressure, as well as growing use of waters by other types of recreationists. They hear of efforts to promote fishing, and ask, "Are you crazy?" This attitude is selfish but selfishness guides many of our attitudes and behaviors and we cannot expect altruistic behavior by anglers or other user groups. Fishery managers may be able to work with some groups of avid anglers like bass clubs in teaching youngsters about fishing, but other avid anglers may not become involved at all.

Some resource managers, too, feel that fishing pressure is excessive and note negative effects on the population structure of gamefish populations as well as negative effects of human growth and manipulation of aquatic systems on threatened or endangered or nongame fish. Within some management agencies, there's a dichotomy between the old "hook-and-bullet" managers concerned with providing opportunities

for anglers and hunters, and biologists with personal interests and duties relating to non-game species. Though habitat factors often can help both game and nongame species, there's potential competition for funds and conflict in management directions.

Yet we are gathered at this meeting to infuse new life into the sport of fishing by making it seem like a fun, healthy, and exciting activity for people of all ages and backgrounds. Some have pushed the panic button that fishing is dying. Well, it's certainly not that bad, but I feel we can do a lot to broaden participation in fishing and simultaneously make the general public more aware of the critical needs for aquatic habitats to support healthy fish populations. Given that fishing waters and fish populations can withstand further fishing pressure within the constraints of harvest regulations, we all need to promote the angling experience in several ways.

While media outlets including print, television, video, radio, and the Internet sometimes have their own agendas, they can be used to promulgate a message that will introduce more people to fishing or to stimulate their interest in the sport and thus increase participation. Remember the role of the media as intermediary. Fishing media outlets seem the most obvious place to start. But consider that communicating through fishing media outlets is in a sense "preaching to the choir," since those who subscribe to fishing magazines, buy fishing books, watch television shows, or visit web sites are probably already avid anglers.

The fishing tackle industry knows how to use the fishing media. They know how to use the media to sell the latest boats, motors, tackle, and so on. Panel members John Storm of Storm Lures and Gary Dollahon from Brunswick and many of their colleagues make sure writers know about new products through news releases, press kits, industry shows, press conferences, phone calls, and other personal contacts. The infrastructure is in place for these major companies to get the news out. And the infrastructure works to pass the word about new programs to keep people fishing. Last month, Gary's office at Zebco sent out a press release not about the newest baitcasting reel, but about a new program to help single parents introduce their children to fishing. Spurred by this effort and other programs, media outlets will alert the public to such opportunities.

Zebco/Quantum, South Bend, Plano, Shakespeare, Silstar, South Bend, Johnson Worldwide Associates, and other large tackle companies recently have made special efforts to package fishing tackle in a way that will be attractive to kids, and some have targeted marketing toward casual anglers. Clearly, the success of these efforts is greatly aided by various types of media coverage, including providing editorial and advertisement space in print, radio, and television outlets.

It's just as important to pass the word to the public about efforts in fishery management that maintain or improve fishing quality. Fishery specialists need to inform the public about the status of endangered and threatened species, underutilized species, urban fisheries, pollution problems, new regulations, and countless other opportunities and situations that managers and biologists know so well. Agencies need to encourage people to fish by providing opportunities and publicizing them.

Some state and federal agencies have their own media outlets to directly inform anglers and the general public, which are so strongly represented in the Information and

Education sessions at this conference. State agencies publish conservation magazines, air radio shows, broadcast TV programs, and build Internet web sites. In the last decade, agencies have hired more information specialists to increase these efforts, which have familiarized the public with department programs and fishing opportunities.

Private media represent a broader avenue for information and education specialists to increase interest in fish and fishing. Field biologists also need to use the private media as well as state outlets to reach their audience. I've been involved in encouraging biologists to do this and trying to open channels for them to communicate for most of the last 20 years. There are many obstacles to outreach by biologists, including work loads, agency priorities and policies, and the technical orientation of some scientists, and perhaps some personality characteristics that lead people to work with animals instead of other people.

And certainly, not all biologists need to deal with communications; it's a time-consuming process. But somebody's got to do it. Failing to do so will erode public participation in fishing, erode public support of fishery agencies, and ultimately allow even more damage to our aquatic systems. The fishing and non-fishing public has a great need to know. Al Houser, the late director of the Oklahoma Fisheries Research Lab once noted, "It ain't that fishermen are ignorant, it's just that they know so many things that ain't so!" I can certainly recognize Houser's viewpoint. But at the same time, improving communications channels with the public through the media can bring valuable information to fishery managers, better profiles of resource users and often new information about the status of water bodies where anglers spend so much time.

For 7 years I served as chairperson of the Public Awareness and Education Committee of the Minnesota Chapter of the American Fisheries Society (AFS). In this role I worked to get AFS members motivated to spread the word about fishery management activities. While we accomplished several valuable projects involving television, print media, meeting with legislators, and news conferences, members and officers sometimes seemed dubious about any benefits from these outreach activities. Some seemed to doubt that any benefit occurred if it couldn't be measured and statistically tested.

During the last 2 years I have also served as co-Chairperson of the AFS parent society's Visibility Committee. Here, too, we accomplished several valuable projects including a news conference and hospitality suite at the annual meeting of the Outdoor Writers Association of America held in Florida in 1997. Making personal contacts like this is an excellent way to blaze a trail for communications. Yet our committee failed to convince AFS headquarters of the need to provide funding for outreach activities. And when I distributed a survey concerning initiatives for the Visibility Committee to officers attending a mid-year EXCOM meeting, I received only a single response, just one. We need to make a much higher priority of working with the media to promote fishing and showing the public the ways we work to improve fishing.

Biologists I knew when working in the field now contact me with story ideas and we talk about the best media outlets. And I've made many contacts since I took the job at *In-Fisherman*. *In-Fisherman* magazine has long been a leader in publishing

articles based on fishery studies. For almost 20 years our “Angling in the 80s” and “Angling in the 90s” features have focused often on fisheries topics. Fishery geneticist Dave Phillip has told me that no publication, scientific or popular, has done as much to publicize his work, attract students to his program, or gain grant money than the 2-part article on conservation genetics that *In-Fisherman* published with Dave’s assistance more than 10 years ago. Our “Bits & Pieces” column regularly reports results of fisheries investigations and we receive as much feedback on these articles as those on angling tactics. The success of this column has encouraged similar columns in other popular fishing magazines. There now are many more outlets for biologists to write or provide information than ever. And anglers are more eager to read this type of information and capable of understanding it than ever before.

Yet biologists have for the most part not taken advantage of these opportunities. *In-Fisherman’s Walleye In-Sider* magazine tries to publish a regular feature on classic walleye lakes. We try to recruit biologists to write short popular accounts of the water body, its fish population characteristics, and management initiatives for the walleye fishery. These articles are very informative for readers, teaching them about specific waters, and also how fisheries management works. Working through the Walleye Technical Committee of AFS and other contacts, we’ve had a hard time convincing field biologists or supervisors to write such articles. Some agencies also don’t allow employees to receive payment for such articles based on work done on agency time or using agency data. Others establish greater hurdles. For example, an employee of a Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit was months late in submitting an article about results of a telemetry study to *In-Fisherman* magazine. The reason, we learned, was that the manuscript had to be channeled through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s review process. After passing through what amounted to peer review and associated editorial changes, we finally received it, only to work the article through our own editorial process, which involved considerable revision.

Working with the media to publicize and promote fishing itself, and to elucidate your own role in fishery management will promote the angling experience, encourage careful use of aquatic resources, and gain respect and support for your studies. First decide what to communicate about. The fields of ecology, physiology, genetics, and animal behavior are alive with fascinating information. Anglers can improve their success by understanding limnology and predator-prey relationships. Many management topics affect anglers directly. In preparing information, be aware that editors and readers want biologists to be authoritative. They reason that you’ve studied the subject, worked for years, and published scientific findings. Yet scientists know that natural phenomena are variable. Anglers often fail to acknowledge the variability of nature. Dr. Ben Peyton, a professor at Michigan State University, has pointed out that the common inability of science to provide clear-cut answers sometimes fosters public doubts concerning the fishery manager’s credibility. Yet it’s critical to convey this aspect of natural variability to anglers and the general public.

To take full advantage of the media to reach the public, it’s important to understand the media outlet you’re dealing with. When working with magazines, find out what sorts of stories they publish, along with writing style and length. These general

guidelines apply to other media as well. Consider also the timeliness of the story, and that editorial calendars for magazines often are set many months in advance. TV, on the other hand, wants to be the first to bring stories to viewers, sometimes just hours after an event.

Remember that it's the job of editors to slice words, add sidebars, and they may need to rewrite some material, particularly if the author has difficulty shifting from stiff and passive scientific writing to popular prose. Don't be offended by changes but work with the staff to assure that the message hasn't been altered. To work more closely with local newspapers, radio, and television, make personal contacts with staff and columnists. Advise them about projects and make it easy for them to write or broadcast a good story. If you're misquoted, work with the media person to prevent such slips in the future but don't close the door to media contact.

My work with outdoor writers demonstrates that they are eager to write stories about fisheries management. Many don't know much about the details of biological studies and may harbor false assumptions. Part of your job in communicating through the media is to contradict false information that gets passed on in ever-more-egregious form from various media, including professional anglers, who often feel compelled to expound on biological management issues by their authoritative stature in the fishing world, despite lack of knowledge about the topic in question. The media also are looking more for happy and wholesome stories to balance the violence and mayhem that seems an essential part of the news. Fishing can fill such a role.

The role of the media is to convey information about fish and fishing that's bound to keep angling among the foremost outdoor experiences of North Americans. They need your help to do this, so I challenge you field biologists to think of ways that you can work through the media to promote understanding of the vast world of fisheries. Some of you in this room already excel in this area, many could do as well if you make it a priority.

I challenge fisheries administrators to establish pathways for your field personnel to work with the media. I urge fisheries professors to expose students in undergraduate and graduate programs to communications, marketing, and social sciences in addition to traditional fisheries subjects. Lecture series, short courses, and symposia can open these doors, as well as standard courses. Fisheries students should broaden their horizons and simultaneously enhance their value to prospective employers by taking a broad selection of courses including human dimensions, communications, and marketing. Make contacts with the fishing media by all means, but work to promote fishing in the broader media, the newspapers and TV news stations that reach an audience of millions, including many who might join the ranks of anglers and conservationists if given a chance.

Literature Cited

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