

Growing the Sport of Fishing: Time for a National Strategic Outreach Plan

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Abstract: Everybody has an opinion why fishing license sales have declined from 1990–1995 and most are quick to identify the cause and offer recommendations on how to stimulate interest in sportfishing. Unfortunately, most of these views are based on limited local experience and narrow perspectives. The sportfishing community needs a national strategic outreach plan prepared by a cross-section of stakeholders. The plan should examine the trend of fishing license sales, reasons for angler desertion, projections, and opportunities for angler recruitment. It should also develop objectives and strategies for increasing angling participation. A proposal is provided identifying how this plan can be achieved.

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The sportfishing community, including anglers, agencies, academia, and industries know there are many factors influencing angling participation. We collectively don't have a clue how these factors interact, who they affect, if they are manageable and who should be responsible for finding solutions.

I believe the declining numbers of anglers is a serious national problem because it will affect advocacy, funding, management, and protection of the fisheries resources. It will also affect the economy of many communities (profits and jobs) and a good and decent, family-oriented lifestyle.

There is no doubt in my mind that we must enhance both recreational and economic advocacy for aquatic resources. Angling cannot be allowed to shrivel down into an insignificant use of aquatic resources. Therefore, use must be encouraged, stimulated—marketed.

Whose job is it?

Everyone in the sportfishing community should become an active, aggressive part of the solution. There will be enough work for everyone. To grow the sport, I believe we must:

- Improve fishing quality and/or perceptions of fishing quality.
- Improve access to the aquatic resources.
- Provide angler education, instruction, and use information.

- Provide outdoor education.
- Improve license distribution, pricing, and marketing.
- Sell the angling experience—why is fishing fun?
- Make fishing travel plans easy.
- Manage water based recreational use.
- Stop preaching to the choir!

Notice, except for the first item—improving fishing quality—all the other activities service the angler or potential angler, not the resource. All the other items involve helping the angler appreciate the resources, understand the opportunity, anticipate the rewards of angling, learn how to use the resources, and learn how and where to fish, making the trip pleasurable, safe, and productive, making it easy to purchase a fishing license, and making the purchase satisfying—not punitive.

Sure, we still have some biological problems to solve like fish diseases, exotic species impacts (zebra mussels, fish, vegetation), but the real challenges revolve around working with the 250 million people who share the resources. There may be tough pills for some resource managers to swallow. I believe it will become evident that to sustain angling in a changing society, agencies will have to divert significant effort away from just managing the aquatic resources to managing the users and helping them enjoy their use of the resources.

I had planned to close by conceptualizing a plan for tackling these angler participation questions. I'm pleased to announce that we are already past the conceptual stage. We now have an unprecedented opportunity for government, industry, and users to work together on a national outreach effort.

The opportunity comes from the draft Wallop-Breaux re-authorization bill which includes \$5 million in fiscal year 1998 for "national outreach and communications." As proposed, the ear-marked funds increase to \$6 million in 1999, \$7 million in 2000, \$8 million in 2001, and \$10 million in 2002, plus an additional \$2.5 million from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS).

Credit the American League of Anglers and Boaters (ALAB) for negotiating this arrangement and the FWS for supporting the effort. This draft Wallop-Breaux re-authorization bill requires that within 1 year after it passes, the Secretary of Interior shall develop and implement a national outreach plan, in cooperation and consultation with the Sport Fishing and Boating Partnership Council (SFBPC).

The FWS asked the SFBPC to recommend a national outreach strategy that will "keep Americans involved in outdoor wildlife-based recreation" by August 1998. Furthermore, the SFBPC was to develop the process for reaching "consensus among natural resource stakeholders" and defining the scope of the strategy.

SFBPC is an officially chartered advisory committee for the Secretary of Interior, through the Director of the FWS. There are 18 members representing government, industry and the American Fisheries Society. Helen Sevier, B.A.S.S., Inc., chief executive officer (CEO), is chair of the SFBPC.

Tom Bedell, CEO of Outdoor Technology Group, and Earl Bentz, president of Bentz Companies (Triton Boats), will co-chair the Outreach Subcommittee of the

SFBPC. Mike Scullia, Boat U.S., and Arva Jackson, retired Department of Commerce, also serve on the committee.

The Outreach Subcommittee met in Chicago on 24 September 1997. They agreed to:

- Develop an inclusive process to bring all stakeholders to focus on the issue and define problems.
- Obtain stakeholder agreement on the problems and buy-in on the process and solutions.
- Develop an objective, data-driven process.
- Accumulate existing data, identify data needs and obtain new data.
- Get stakeholders “involved” in the study team.
- Utilize recognized national experts on angler polls and demographic trends.

The Outreach Subcommittee’s immediate tasks include preparing a list of stakeholders; sending out invitations for a national meeting to launch the vision on 19 November 1997 in Alexandria, Virginia; requiring information concerning trends for fishing and boating; analyzing new and existing data; and establishing a schedule for meeting the August 1998 deadline. These actions will allow the subcommittee to define the issues and identify problems.

The challenge is before us. Sport Fish Restoration Act dollars will be available to support an effort to encourage more Americans to participate in fishing and boating. The entire sportfishing community can now participate by defining problems and identifying processes, tools, and motivational techniques as we respond to the SFBPC’s request for information and cooperation.