

Sportfishing Promotion Council: A Model of Successful Public-Private Sector Outreach Partnerships

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Abstract: Recreational fishing has been on a decline. This can be attributed to various reasons such as increasing numbers of single parent families, increased urbanization, and less leisure time. To help reverse this trend, the Sportfishing Promotion Council (SPC) is combining the marketing expertise of industry with the fishery management expertise of agencies into state-level partnerships that are successfully introducing more people to fishing and teaching about the conservation needs of aquatic habitats. Through programs such as youth fishing derbies, toll-free telephone systems, and mass media communications, the SPC is currently providing state agencies with increased public outreach capabilities and new methods of interacting directly with constituents. With funding provided by Sportfish Restoration funds and industry contributions, the SPC program is free to state agencies and 20 state partnerships have to date been assembled.

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Over the past several years, sportfishing has been on a decline. Consumer research studies conducted by the American Sportfishing Association show that changing demographic, social, and recreational trends are impacting sportfishing participation and recruitment of new anglers. The sportfishing industry recognized that to effectively reverse these trends, industry must work in partnership with state and federal fishery agencies to deliver the sportfishing message. To organize and facilitate working partnerships, the Sportfishing Promotion Council (SPC) was founded with a single purpose: to increase the awareness of and participation in sportfishing. Working directly with 20 state fish management agencies, the SPC operates from an educational and public outreach model available for all to utilize.

Increasing sportfishing does more than benefit industry sales. Sportfishing helps tie families together by providing a life-long recreation available to all, it introduces kids to a confidence-building activity away from street pressures, and, through urban ponds and rivers, helps to provide a perfect stress relief

after a hard day at work. In addition to the personal and community benefits, increasing sportfishing helps develop public concern for protecting our nation's precious fish and wildlife resources and aids government efforts by providing valuable funds through license revenues and dedicated excise taxes on fishing equipment.

To introduce the public to the many benefits from sportfishing, and provide state agencies and industries with the benefits from increased angling, the SPC conducts educational outreach programs in three basic areas:

- A) state-industry public outreach partnerships,
- B) national media campaigns, and the
- C) 1-800-ASK-FISH program.

By borrowing from the wide range of skills of the private and public sectors, each of the three programs is designed to overcome many of the roadblocks that impede greater sportfishing awareness and participation.

State-Industry Public Outreach Partnerships

Youth and adults today are faced with many social trends affecting sportfishing participation. The rise in single parent families, increased urbanization, emergence of video games, drugs, and other pressures on youth all combine to increase the obstacles to fishing. Composed of local businesses, state fishery representatives, civic organizations, and concerned private individuals, partnerships are being assembled and facilitated by the SPC to actively organize public fishing outreach programs.

Why work through a partnership? By combining the marketing and materials expertise of business with the fish and public management expertise of agencies, both sides have new access to resources to go further than they could alone. Basically, state agencies are primarily geared for biological management projects and have traditionally not been effective in implementing and operating public communication and education efforts. Likewise, industry members are typically experts in sales and marketing and are not capable fishery managers. By working through a partnership, each can concentrate on their specialty thereby effectively reaching a larger audience.

The SPC directly supports each state partnership with funds, fishing equipment, advertising/marketing assistance, and other items as necessary. These materials are provided as "seed" helping the partnership to grow until it is self-sustaining. Other items such as hats, buttons, bumper stickers, and other materials designed to promote the fun of fishing are also provided to the partnerships and to state fish agencies to distribute to the general public. The SPC also serves each partnership as a facilitator helping to recruit new partners, organize meetings, and handle the administrative duties that industry and agency partners with other outside full-time commitments cannot handle.

State SPC partnerships begin with a meeting between the state fish agency

and state business representatives. Organized and facilitated by the SPC through its extensive industry contacts, the purpose of this session is for both sides to meet each other, learn how the state is currently working to increase fishing, brainstorm together on how fishing participation can be enhanced, form detailed plans on how to proceed, and then assign tasks to those who wish to be involved. All during this meeting, SPC staff provide recommendations and experiences from other states and, based on extensive market research conducted by the American Sportfishing Association, offers insights into the minds and actions of anglers and would be anglers. Later, private clubs and volunteers are recruited by partnership members to help implement outreach programs. Examples of SPC programs include:

The Florida Fishing and Boating Buddies (FFBB)—A non-profit incorporated partnership organized by the SPC, this program organizes youth fishing programs across the state. Working with public and private sector partners, the FFBB reaches to the non-angling public through schools and local media to provide fishing instruction and opportunities. A unique aspect of the FFBB is a database of previous FFBB event participants. Prior to an upcoming event, every child receives a personalized invitation to help reinforce their fishing experience. A similar program is now on the drawing board for Mississippi.

Library loaner programs—Often, the non-availability of equipment serves as a “catch-22” to fishing participation. Non-anglers without equipment cannot fish; however, without experiencing the fun of fishing, they will not invest in equipment. To help overcome this roadblock, state SPC partnerships are placing fishing equipment in public libraries. SPC partners then advertise the equipment’s availability. Fishing classes and other promotional events can then be organized at the libraries to further increase fishing education. This program was piloted in Kent, Ohio, and is being expanded into other states.

Fishing Instructor Support Programs—Many state fishery agencies actively train volunteers to become certified fishing instructor programs. Once trained, the instructors conduct fishing classes for schools, scouts, churches, day camps, and other organizations. However, state agency access to fishing equipment and limited ability to publicize the instructor programs have restricted the number of people reached by these programs. The SPC has organized programs in cooperation with retailers that now provide instructors with publicity and equipment.

With retailers storing equipment, volunteer instructors can now borrow equipment to teach classes, use retailer facilities to hold classes, and receive assistance from retailers in promoting fishing education opportunities to the public. In addition, retailers assist by using their community connections to recruit additional instructors. These programs are now operating in New York and Minnesota. In New Mexico and Washington, D.C., the SPC is working from ground zero to establish instructor recruitment and training programs.

1-800-ASK-FISH

The second SPC outreach program is accessible to the entire U.S. population. The 1-800-ASK-FISH hotline is a free 24-hour automated information service that provides anglers with the information needed to overcome many roadblocks to greater sportfishing participation. Information provided includes fishing access sites, handicap and boat access locations, rules and regulations, camping access, regular fishing reports, and automated license sales (depending on the state selected). By working with the state-industry partnerships and their contacts to media and other communication resources, the 1-800-ASK-FISH program receives extensive publicity. In addition, the SPC promotes each state 1-800 program through press releases to state media and businesses.

One special feature of the 1-800-ASK-FISH system is 24-hour license sales. For the consumer, 1-800-ASK-FISH offers the ability to buy licenses at any hour from any location—even out of state. No more searching for license vendors or missing the best fishing hour while waiting for a store to open. For the state fishery agency, benefits include increased license revenues and the ability to automatically mail renewal notices to all license holders. This system was piloted in Mississippi and began service on 1 May 1994.

Public Awareness Efforts

For reasons such as having moved away from the “ol’ fishing hole,” working overtime, or having found new interests, many people are no longer fishing. Alarming, many of these people are not providing their kids with the experiences they so enjoyed while growing up. To address these trends, the SPC has conducted media campaigns resulting in millions of impressions. The purpose of these campaigns is to promote fishing by reminding adults of the fun they had fishing as a youth, to encourage them to take their own kids and friends fishing, and to convince would-be anglers of the fun of fishing. Many of the SPC radio and television efforts have been conducted for specific state-industry partnerships and to promote free fishing days, National Fishing Week, and other special fishing events.

Successes of the SPC:

During its first three years, the SPC has achieved enormous growth and success. Examples include:

- the launching of 20 public-private sector partnerships,
- the entry of 10 states into the 1-800-ASK-FISH program,
- two major national radio campaigns: one featuring country music stars George Jones and Travis Tritt and the other reminding people of the joys of fishing. Total impressions: over 75 million. In addition, numerous state and local

campaigns have been implemented by the SPC to support state-industry partnerships.

- over 15 million impressions generated through SPC-placed articles in over 250 newspapers nationally. In addition, many others have read of the fun of fishing through free publicity produced by SPC-sponsored events and youth programs.

- approximately 2.0 million promotional items have been distributed featuring promotional messages such as “Eat . . . Sleep . . . Go Fishing” and “Go Fishing . . . It’s Awesome!”

- over 15,000 kids have been exposed to fishing through fishing derbies and other educational events.

State Agency Involvement with the SPC and Funding

Funding for the SPC follows the partnership concept. With the support and approval of the IAFWA, the SPC has received funding through the Federal Aid in Sportfish Restoration program. In addition, industry members contribute significant amounts of cash and in-kind contributions. In 1993 alone, 60 percent of the SPC’s funding and in-kind assistance (public advertising, salary, and overhead expenses, fishing equipment, etc.) was contributed from private sources.

The SPC partnership can be viewed as a tripod. The three legs are state agencies, businesses, and the volunteers they recruit. Without any one leg, the tripod will fail. The SPC was created with the state agency in mind. By enhancing state agency efforts to increase public participation in sportfishing, we all win.