Canoeing and Angling in Southwestern Wisconsin

Southwestern Wisconsin, in some ways, has been sheltered from the world. In this historically sleepy part of rural Wisconsin, the economy has not kept pace with the rest of the state. Family farming has been a mainstay for the last century, but currently is declining. At the same time, increasing numbers of outsiders have discovered the pastoral landscapes of rolling hills, spring-fed streams, and winding, scenic, two-lane roads. Residents are beginning to ask, what is the future of this region, given new land-use pressures and an economy increasingly influenced by outdoor recreation?
The attraction of Wisconsin’s Driftless Area is indisputable. The steep valleys, forested hills, coldwater streams, and rural character are exquisite. The landscape itself bears witness to environmental resiliency and socioeconomic change. The farming practices of the first European settlers in the area caused erosion on the hillsides and sedimentation of local streams. Improved soil conservation practices, resource rehabilitation, and changes in land use have reversed years of decline, resulting in cleaner water and a healthier landscape. Resource management agencies and conservation groups have worked hard to improve the habitats in streams that were previously degraded.

Interlaced within this matrix of change is the fact that comprehensive planning has not been a high priority for local government. As recreational activities increase, local land use patterns and the structure of community economies change. Planning allows residents of these communities to manage this change.

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Two popular recreational activities in the region that rely on clean streams and rivers are canoeing and trout angling. During the 1999 summer season, anglers and canoeists combined brought $2.2 million of new spending to the Kickapoo and Timber Coulee watersheds. The total estimated economic impact was $3.25 million, which helped to support approximately 85 local jobs.

Local communities view the increasing importance of recreation to the local economy as a mixed blessing. While more anglers and canoeists are bringing the promise of increased economic activity, their presence also threatens to change the character of the landscape and communities cherished by young and old alike.

This fact sheet, along with the research report on which it is based, sheds light on the impacts of canoeing and angling in the region, and may help encourage a broader dialog on managing those impacts.
Over the years, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) and other local conservation agencies and sports clubs have invested in extensive stream habitat improvement and expanding public access. This emphasis has apparently provided benefits not only to the streams and fishery, but also to the local economy.

The research project at a glance

For purposes of comparison, the study replicated two earlier canoeing and trout angling impact studies conducted in the region. The earlier data were collected in 1993 and 1994, with the more recent data collected during 1999. The objectives of the 1999 study were to:

✓ Collect demographic information of canoeists and anglers and their issues of concern;

✓ Estimate the local economic impacts of canoeist and angler spending on local communities; and

✓ Describe the change in the impacts of canoeing and angling since the previous studies were conducted.

During the summer of 1999, brief face-to-face interviews at randomly selected times and locations and follow-up written mail surveys were used with canoeists. Canoeists were interviewed at known canoe landings between Ontario and Lafarge along the Kickapoo River. Post cards with survey requests were placed on the cars of anglers parked along popular regional trout streams. They were followed up with a mail survey. Most of the data collection occurred on the Timber-Coulee system and along the West Fork of the Kickapoo, two of the most popular fishing destinations in the region. Trout angling data were also collected on Billing Creek, Camp Creek, and Bishop Branch in the Kickapoo watershed.

The complete report, Outdoor Recreation, Community Development, and Change Through Time: A Replicated Study of Canoeing and Trout Angling in Southwestern Wisconsin, can be obtained by contacting the Center for Community Economic Development, University of Wisconsin-Extension, Lowell Center, third floor, 610 Landon St., Madison, WI 53703-1195.
Visitation Changes Over Time

Visitor numbers

The most striking finding from this study was the steep increase in visitors, and their dollars, to the area. In the 1994 angling season, there were 4,000 anglers who fished on the West Fork and Timber-Coulee. In 1999, there were more than twice as many anglers – an estimated 8,800 anglers fished along the streams sampled. Approximately two-thirds of these anglers (about 6,300) traveled from outside the area to fish in the region. Likewise, approximately 16,000 canoeists used the Kickapoo River between Memorial Day and Labor Day during the 1999 season, a 33% increase from 1993 when 12,000 canoeists were estimated to have paddled the river. As with angling, the vast majority of canoeists came from outside the area – about 14,000 in 1999, an increase of almost 5,000 more canoeists than in the summer of 1993.

Visitor profiles

Demographics gathered in the study gave researchers a slightly different picture of the stream users than the image portrayed by some. The majority of the users were well-educated and held professional or managerial jobs. In general, the average angler came for longer periods of time, stayed in smaller groups and tended to spend more than the average canoeist. However, because canoeists are usually in larger groups and there are more of them, they have a greater direct economic impact. These findings have implications for recreational site development issues such as restroom needs and littering.

By a considerable margin, the Timber-Coulee and the West Fork of the Kickapoo were the most popular fishing destinations. Most of the anglers visiting the region used fly-fishing equipment – about 82%, compared to just 18% who reported using spin-casting equipment. A large portion of the anglers, 94%, reported practicing catch-and-release most or all of the time. Anglers fishing in the area were overwhelmingly male – 95%. About 42% of the anglers indicated an interest in buying property in the Kickapoo Valley Area, whereas virtually no canoeists indicated an interest in buying property in the area.

Approximately 80% of the canoeists rented boats from one of the local liveries. In general, most canoeists took fairly short trips. Almost half, 45%, canoed from the community of Ontario to Wildcat Mountain State Park, a three-mile trip. Canoeists were fairly evenly split between men (44%) and women (56%). Like the anglers, they also tended to be fairly well-educated and worked in professional and managerial jobs. Canoeists on average had lower household incomes than anglers.
Expenditures of non-local anglers increased more than 3 1/3 times, and non-local canoeists 3 times when compared with the previous studies. Non-local anglers created just over $1 million of new spending in the region in 1999, with a total economic impact of $1.5 million. Canoeists visiting from outside the area created about $1.2 million of new spending, with a total economic impact of $1.75 million.

Changes reflected in the numbers

- During the summer of 1999, anglers and canoeists had an estimated economic impact of $3.25 million in the region surrounding and including the Kickapoo and Timber Coulee watersheds.
- In 1994, 4,000 anglers used the West Fork and Timber-Coulee. In 1999, there were more than twice as many anglers – an estimated 8,800.
- In the summer of 1993, 12,000 people canoed the Kickapoo River. In 1999, 16,000 people canoed the river.
- Over 80% of all canoe traffic exists on the river segment from Ontario to Wildcat Mountain State Park.
- In 1994, the ratio for non-local to local anglers was one-to-one. In 1999, that ratio was three nonlocals to one local.
- Although crowding is not yet a critical issue, on weekends 37% of the respondents (anglers and canoeists) felt that the river was “moderately” or “extremely crowded.”
- More than 40% of the anglers indicated an interest in buying property in the Kickapoo Valley area, whereas virtually no canoeists indicated an interest in buying property.
Planning and Development Issues

Kickapoo solitude

Both canoeists and anglers expressed a strong desire for solitude. With increases in both angling and canoeing activity, concerns about the potential problems of crowding were analyzed for both groups. Despite recent attention to the issue, 72% of the anglers reported feeling “not at all” or “lightly” crowded during their outing. Perceived crowding by canoeists varied largely by day of the week. During the week, more than 70% of respondents reported “no crowding whatsoever,” and no one reported “extreme crowding.” On the weekends, 37% of the respondents felt that the river was “moderately” or “extremely crowded.” However, these results suggest that crowding is becoming an issue.

Littering along the shorelines, the lack of bathrooms and availability of drinking water were perceived to be below satisfactory with canoeists. The results also suggest that these issues should be addressed with interested parties.

Tourism development

Having two sets of data six years apart to compare turned out to be very useful. The total number of anglers more than doubled between the two time periods and canoeing rose by about 33%. In 1994, the ratio for non-local to local anglers was one-to-one. In 1999, that ratio was three non-locals to one local. Average trip length was slightly longer for anglers, and spending on food and lodging increased for both groups as well. Canoeists appeared to be using motels in greater numbers than in 1993. When adjusted for inflation, lodging expenditures rose by 600%. Outdoor-based recreation still only accounts for a small portion of the local regional economy. However, many of the destination communities are quite small and the infusion of dollars from both anglers and canoeists is important in those places, as evidenced by the increased number of fishing guides and canoe livery businesses since 1993 and 1994.

Fisheries management

The survey results suggest that people are generally satisfied with fisheries management in southwest Wisconsin. Anglers do not appear overly interested in catching large trophy fish. These results reinforce the WDNR’s management emphasis on wild and native trout rather than on stocking and managing strictly for trophy fish. Since anglers were least satisfied with etiquette and crowding, the WDNR and partner agencies and organizations might consider public education efforts to increase awareness of common fishing etiquette. Although crowding is not yet a critical issue for anglers, if visitation levels continue to increase at the same rate as in the past five years, agencies and groups may need to develop management policies to address this issue.
Anglers reported that scenic beauty, clean water, and good public access were important attributes of their fishing experience and that they were generally very satisfied with these features. By contrast, anglers stated they were relatively less satisfied with angler etiquette and stream crowding.

Canoeing and river management

Some of the most important issues for canoeists include the lack of convenient toilet facilities and drinking water, and improved take-out points. Managers at Wildcat Mountain State Park, the Kickapoo Valley Reserve, and the canoe livery owners should work together to address some of these pressing issues. Since canoeists also ranked litter as a concern, these same groups might also consider public education strategies and programs to discourage littering.

Crowding is also an important issue to canoeists. Over 80% of all canoe traffic exists on the river segment from Ontario to Wildcat Mountain State Park. Remedies for the crowding issue might include encouraging canoeing on weekdays, when there is minimal traffic on the river, promoting canoe trips south of the State Park, and expanding the canoeable reach of river south of LaFarge.

Planning for Community Change

The potential economic benefits of tourism are hard to ignore, especially in an area that has historically experienced economic hardships. Both anglers and canoeists ranked scenic beauty and clean water as two of the most important factors in their recreational experience. Currently, the Kickapoo watershed and southwest Wisconsin enjoy relatively healthy land management and use patterns that contribute to clean water and the rural and scenic nature of the landscape. In addition to increased tourism activity in the region, more and more people are buying land for recreational purposes. As land use patterns change, and if tourism development continues to increase, local decision-makers may wish to consider ways to protect the scenic nature of the landscape and promote good stewardship of lands in order to protect land and water resources.

The ramifications of increased tourism to an area are multi-dimensional and significant. It is important that individuals and organizations that are promoting tourism growth understand these changes and consider the issue from all angles. Hopefully, the results from this research study will help inform discussion about how local residents and visitors alike might manage the rate and direction of these impacts.
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