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PUBLIC ACCESS IN COLORADO: WHAT ARE RECREATIONISTS' PERCEIVED PROBLEMS AND PREFERRED SOLUTIONS?

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The specifics of the problem may vary, but time and again, many hunters, anglers and wildlife viewers have experienced difficulty obtaining access when enjoying wildlife in Colorado. Problems with access can take many forms -- not having accurate landownership maps, sketchy information on what roads are private, areas that are too crowded, and public lands blocked by private ownership, to name a few.

A basic goal of the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) is to provide quality wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing opportunities for the public.

Increasingly, the topic of public access is a concern and the CDOW has developed a plan to improve the access situation.

In the process of plan development, one of several considerations was public attitudes about access. Consequently, in the early stages of planning, the CDOW worked with the Human Dimensions in Natural Resources Unit at Colorado State University (CSU) to study public perceptions of the problem. The CDOW/CSU team identified questions about access that, once answered, would help the CDOW improve access. The questions included: How often do

people experience access difficulties in Colorado? What kinds of problems do they encounter? Which groups have the most problems? How do these problems affect their outdoor experience? And, what would the public like the CDOW to do about improving access to public lands?

WHAT PAST RESEARCH HAS TOLD US ABOUT ACCESS

Past studies reveal some clues about access-related problems in Colorado. Access problems of hunters, anglers, and wildlife viewers surfaced in an early study (Vigil, Galloway and Associates, 1986) and this planted the seed for a more detailed look at the issue in future research.

Later studies offer insights into the access problems of wildlife viewers. One study developed a portrait of nonconsumptive wildlife recreationists in the Denver area (Manfredo and Larson, 1993). A portion of the study investigated access constraints that inhibit the public from viewing wildlife. According to this study, nonconsumptive wildlife enthusiasts fell into distinct categories, each with different needs to enhance their wildlife viewing experiences. The access constraints these recreationists encountered were generally dependent on the type of nonconsumptive wildlife enthusiast they were. For example, those people who were highly involved in wildlife viewing experiences generally felt that their greatest access problem was on-site crowding. In contrast, those people who were less active in wildlife viewing felt most constrained by not knowing where to go and how to view wildlife.

Another study interviewed a statewide sample of nonconsumptive wildlife

enthusiasts (Standage Accureach, Inc. 1990). The access problems that prevented them from enjoying their favorite wildlife-related activity were not knowing as much about the activity as they would like, not knowing where to go, areas that were too crowded, and too far away.

THE FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

Because substantial data about nonconsumptive recreationists' access problems were already available, CDOW/CSU team members decided to focus on other wildlife recreationists. Specifically, the access team initiated a study which focused on the access problems of seven groups of people who fish and hunt in Colorado.

The objectives of the study were: 1) to identify how often several common types of access problems occur, 2) to determine the effect of these access problems on the recreationists' experience, and 3) to determine recreationists' preferences for management actions which might be taken to alleviate access problems.

Seven user groups were surveyed: warmwater anglers, coldwater stream anglers, coldwater lake anglers, resident and nonresident big game hunters (deer and elk only), small game and waterfowl hunters. Names of hunters and anglers were drawn at random from 1991 Colorado hunting and fishing licenses. Over 3,000 telephone interviews were conducted in May and June, 1992.

In one portion of the survey, hunters and anglers were asked how often they had a problem with the following nine potential access problems:

- obtaining accurate information about which roads are legally open to public travel
- obtaining accurate landownership maps
- determining the boundaries of public lands
- obtaining permission to fish or hunt on private property
- finding accessible areas where there is a good chance of catching fish or bagging game
- finding accessible areas that are not crowded
- obtaining access to public lands or waters because they are blocked by private property
- restrictions on the use of off-road vehicles
- locating areas accessible only by foot or horse.

Respondents were asked how frequently each of these nine problems was encountered and how each would affect their experience, when or if it occurs. For purposes of reporting this study, respondents are said to have a frequent access problem if the problem occurred often or very often; a negative impact on their outdoor experience is reported if they said it was a moderately negative or highly negative effect.

STUDY HIGHLIGHTS

The major findings of the study are highlighted below.

- **On-site crowding is the problem hunters and anglers encounter most often and had the most negative impact on their experience**

Thirty-six percent of those surveyed said on-site crowding occurred frequently and had a negative impact on their experience. Being able to find areas with a good chance of catching fish or bagging game was also a frequent, negative problem for 28% of those interviewed.

Nearly one out of four hunters and anglers found that determining the boundaries of public lands was a frequent and negative problem, and about two out of ten surveyed said that getting access to public lands blocked by private lands, finding accurate landownership maps, and obtaining permission to hunt/fish on private lands were problems occurring frequently and having a negative impact on their hunting/fishing experience.

- **Waterfowl, resident big game, and small game hunters are the most affected by access difficulties; anglers the least**

Clear differences exist between the seven hunting and angling groups as to what access problems are encountered, and how this affects their experience. Overall, waterfowl hunters had the highest average percent of access problems that they rated as frequently occurring and negative in their impact (29%), followed by resident big game hunters (25%) and small game hunters (23%). Anglers reported the fewest

problems (11% of coldwater lake anglers, 15% of coldwater stream anglers, and 17% of warmwater anglers).

When examining specific access problems and their impact on hunters and anglers, differences emerge between these recreational groups.

Waterfowl Hunters. The most frequent, negative problems for waterfowl hunters are finding areas that are not crowded (48%) and finding areas with a chance of bagging game (43%). Over one-third of waterfowl hunters indicated that other problems encountered are obtaining permission to hunt on private lands, obtaining accurate landownership maps, and determining the boundaries of public lands.

Big Game Hunters. (deer and elk only). Slightly more than four out of ten resident big game hunters indicated that finding areas which are not crowded is the most frequently encountered access problem that negatively impacted their experience. Three out of ten respondents in this group experienced problems with determining the boundaries of public lands, obtaining permission to hunt on private lands, finding areas with a chance of bagging game, and obtaining access to public lands blocked by private lands.

Like resident big game hunters, nonresidents indicated that the most frequent and negative problem is finding areas that are not crowded (29%). One out of four in this group also indicated they encountered problems with determining the boundaries of public lands, finding areas where there is a chance of bagging game, and getting to public areas blocked by private land.

Small Game Hunters. Three out of ten small game hunters reported the following problems to be frequent and negative: obtaining accurate landownership maps, determining the boundaries of public lands, finding areas with a chance of bagging game, and finding accessible areas which are not crowded.

Anglers. Among the access problems presented to coldwater lake, coldwater stream and warmwater anglers, crowding was again the problem most frequently encountered and negative (30%, 27% and 41%, respectively).

- **Different recreationist types preferred different management actions**

When asked how they would spend \$100 among five management strategies designed to improve access to public lands in the state, different license holder groups felt differently about management priorities.

Waterfowl hunters indicated strongest support for acquiring more areas as a solution to their access concerns (an average of \$34 out of \$100 spent). While small game hunters also reported acquisition as a priority (\$23), they put a similar and slightly higher priority on management actions that would improve the quality of areas already accessible (\$26) and providing access to public lands blocked by private property (\$24). Both resident and nonresident big game hunters felt strongly about the need to provide access to blocked public lands (\$34 and \$30, respectively). In addition, resident and nonresident big game hunters felt management should work toward improving the quality of areas already accessible (\$26 and \$31, respectively).

Anglers indicated strongest preference for management action to improve the quality of areas already accessible (coldwater lake anglers allocated an average of \$36, coldwater stream anglers averaged \$30, and warmwater anglers allocated \$37).

All seven groups ranked installing more signs to designate accessible areas and providing more information about places to fish or hunt as lower priority.

- **Big game, small game and waterfowl hunters supported creation of more areas where the number of hunters is limited**

Would anglers and hunters support designation of areas where their numbers would be limited? Almost three out of four waterfowl hunters, six of ten small game hunters, and seven of ten big game hunters (resident and nonresident alike) would support such an action. Anglers were split on their support for such designations.

SUMMARY

This 1992 access survey indicated that a number of access problems exist for hunters and anglers in Colorado, particularly among waterfowl hunters, resident big game hunters and small game hunters. Anglers and nonresident big game hunters report fewer access problems.

Of the nine access problems the CDOW/CSU team addressed, crowding was the most frequent problem encountered and was also seen as having the most negative impact on the recreationists' experience.

In response to the problems encountered, respondents felt that management actions to improve the quality of lands already in public ownership and acquisition of new lands should receive most emphasis. Creating more areas where the number of hunters would be limited would also be a management action preference for most waterfowl, small game and big game hunters.

An important impetus for conducting this study was the CDOW's need to develop a plan for land and water acquisition which would set priorities for the types of real estate to be acquired. Data from this study helped to confirm low-elevation riparian habitat (waterfowl and small game access) as the top priority overall and warmwater and urban fishing access as the top fishing priorities. The data also supports the Division's priority for providing access to state school lands for big game hunting and access to adjacent federal lands. The land and water acquisition plan was approved by the Colorado Wildlife Commission in January, 1993 and is the most up to date statement of the Division's land acquisition priorities currently available.

Copies of either the project report entitled, "Angler and Hunter Access Problems in Colorado: A Survey of Problem Frequency, Problem Effect, and Management Response Preferences", or the Division's Land and Water Acquisition Plan are available by contacting Vicki Vargas-Madrid, CDOW, at 303-291-7208.

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