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**Fishing Permit Study Will Improve Economic Evaluation Tools,
Better Characterize Worth of Massachusetts' Recreational Fishery**

An unusual social sciences study just getting underway in Massachusetts will measure the value of the recreational saltwater fishing experience by surveying those who actually go fishing or plan to go fishing in 2012.

Most economic studies of saltwater recreational fishing estimate the number of jobs and the amount of sales and income supported by the spending of saltwater recreational fishermen in the state, but have not included the value anglers themselves place on being able to go saltwater fishing.

"Being able to improve evaluation methods by comparing responses to real offers with responses to hypothetical offers will be a great benefit, and that's what this study is intended to give us," said Scott Steinback, the NOAA economist who designed the study. "Studies like this have been done to value other kinds of intangible benefits like recovering endangered species or valuing open space, but I think this is the first time it has been used to value the pleasure and satisfaction derived from recreational fishing," he said.

The resulting data will thus allow researchers to validate and improve frequently used economic evaluation methods by gathering data from anglers themselves about the value they place on recreational fishing, a topic Steinback has studied for about 20 years.

Dan Ariely, a professor of behavioral economics at Duke University, called the recreational saltwater fishing permit survey a very interesting and important study that could benefit many other fields of research.

"For a long time, we have been doing studies asking people for their intuition, what they believe will happen. In this particular case, the study is going to contrast beliefs to actual decisions - actual decisions when the money is in front of you. Hypothetical questions and how we respond to them is central to a lot of other questions," Ariely said. "If we find that there are substantial biases between these approaches, it would be easy to conduct more hypothetical studies to get a sense for what would be the response if they saw it in front of them."

The survey is being managed by Quantech, Inc, a statistical analysis and survey research firm, for NOAA Fisheries Service and the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries, which maintains the state's recreational saltwater fishing permit registry. The state is providing a list of randomly selected recreational fishing permit holders who will be mailed the survey. Participation is voluntary and individual information is confidential.

NOAA Fisheries has allocated \$145,000 to conduct the study, about \$75,000 of which is set aside for cash incentives being offered to 500 of the 1,900 randomly selected permit holders to help determine the value people place on access to saltwater angling.

The survey involves three “treatments” or survey approaches. The first treatment, being mailed to 500 people, includes a written survey plus an actual check in an amount ranging between \$15 and \$500 that can be cashed in exchange for the recipient giving up their Massachusetts saltwater angling permit for the remainder of 2012.

The second treatment, being mailed to 700 anglers, includes a survey with hypothetical cash incentives offered in the same varying amounts as those offered in the first treatment but without an actual check in that amount enclosed. The third treatment, being mailed to 700 people, includes the same survey but asks the recipient what amount they would be willing to pay; the amounts to choose from are the same as those in the other treatments.

The first surveys were mailed February 23, 2012 and will continue monthly through May. Those receiving the survey are notified in advance of the initial mailing to explain the importance of the study, why it is being conducted, and who is conducting it.

Those who receive checks can cash them at any time during a specified time period, approximately 45 days after they receive the check, but in return are asked to give back their 2012 permit. Mailings remind recipients to think carefully before responding.

Steinback and other NOAA economists will compare the rates of acceptance between the real and the hypothetical offers to evaluate differences between the approaches and to, ultimately, calculate the total dollar value anglers place on recreational fishing in Massachusetts waters.

Steinback says the focus of the study is about measuring the value of recreational fishing in Massachusetts, and not about an attempt to raise fishing permit fees or prohibit people from enjoying the recreational saltwater fishing experience.

“I understand if there are some questions and concerns because this kind of survey has not been done before, but it is not about taking anything away. Rather, I see it as a way to provide a monetary estimate of ‘angler satisfaction’,” he said. “Recreational anglers spend a lot of money to enjoy their passion, and this study will allow us to place a value on the level of satisfaction anglers receive, above and beyond their out of pocket costs. It is a return on investment for everyone: we want to provide the best possible information to enable them to continue to do so.”

“I am a big fan of the endowment effect: once people own something they think about it very differently,” said Ariely, who also serves as a visiting professor at MIT’s Program in Media Arts and Sciences. “The fact that government agencies are collaborating and doing some experiments or studies like this permit survey rather than relying on intuition or hypothetical responses is a positive thing.”

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Related links:

NOAA Marine Recreational Fishing Services:

<http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/sfa/PartnershipsCommunications/recfish/index.htm>

2012 Massachusetts saltwater angler permit survey information:

http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dmf/marinefisheriesnotices/2012/saltwater_angler_permit_survey_022812.html