Research shows that more than half of all anglers (57%) use a boat while fishing. Further, of the total number of days these anglers spent fishing, about half (48%) were spent fishing from boats (more than 246 million days fishing from boats).\(^1\) Additionally, two key factors anglers consider when deciding where to fish are whether there is boat access (54% of anglers say this factor is very important) and whether the access area has a well-maintained boat ramp (also 54%).\(^2\) Yet, despite the link between boating/fishing access and participation, recruitment, and retention among boaters and anglers, a comprehensive national assessment of the current and future needs for boating access has never been conducted.

This study asks the question: Is boating access impacting boating and fishing participation? To this end, the study focuses on the intersection between boating and fishing activities. There is no doubt that recreational boating and fishing activities are intertwined and, consequently, as the number of participants in one activity falls, the other falls as well: conversely, as participation rises in one, it also rises in the other. This study is designed (1) to determine whether lack of boating access has contributed to decreases in participation and (2) to create assessment tools for boating access that states and regions can replicate to measure their boating access programs and needs.

The two-year project has been funded under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Multi-State Conservation Grant Program. SOBA is leading the study efforts, and partners in this study include: Recreational Boating and Fishing

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Foundation (RBFF), National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA), Boat Owners Association of the United States (BoatU.S.), and Association of Marina Industries (AMI). The research team has contracted Responsive Management, an independent research firm specializing in public opinion research on natural resource and outdoor recreation issues, to conduct the study.

The study began with a project kick-off meeting in January 2013, and Responsive Management has completed several project elements, including a research review of similar efforts to assess boating access, identify obstacles and challenges, and develop a foundational context for assessment design. In addition to the research review, Responsive Management has also conducted 4 focus groups with boaters in Houston, Texas; Richmond, Virginia; Kenosha, Wisconsin; and Portland, Oregon. In addition, Responsive Management conducted a focus group with the SOBA Board in March 2013 and another focus group with boating industry/business at the American Boating Congress in May 2013.

Responsive Management has also developed a telephone survey focused on fishing and boating participation, factors that impacting boating enjoyment and participation, boat ownership, ratings of the importance of boating and fishing, and use of and opinions on boat access, to name a few topics. Using this survey, Responsive Management will obtain 3,300 telephone surveys nationwide: 3,000 surveys of boaters and anglers, 200 surveys of boating professionals, and 100 surveys of industry professionals and private business owners (e.g., marinas, docks, boating vendors).

In addition to this telephone survey, Responsive Management is developing survey modules, which can be used as an assessment tool that states can utilize for conducting detailed statewide assessments to identify locally-specific approaches to improving public access. The development of survey modules will help standardize the assessment and provide consistent and comparable data from which to measure improvements in boating access. Ultimately, Year 2 of this study will result in an assessment tool, adaptable at national, regional, and state levels, designed for repetition at periodic intervals to measure change, progress, and improvement in access and obstacles to access.

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