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FEE-FISHING: INTRODUCTION AND MARKETING

Michael P. Masser

Auburn University, Alabama

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Fee-Fishing Enterprises

Editor's Note: Three papers were presented in the fee-fishing concurrent session, but one paper was not submitted for publication in the proceedings.

The following title was presented in the session but not submitted for publication:

Jeffrey Hinshaw, North Carolina State University—Utilizing Coldwater Species for Fee Fishing

FEE-FISHING: INTRODUCTION AND MARKETING

MICHAEL P. MASSER, 106 Swingle Hall, Auburn University, Alabama 36849-5628

Essential ingredients for a successful fee-fishing operation include: location, knowledge of clientele, facility design, providing services, advertising, and management of the fish. A fee-fishing operation is a business, a recreational people-oriented business, and not just a method to market fish.

LOCATION

The most successful fee-fishing operations are within 50 miles of a 50,000+ population center. Other location factors which can enhance fee-fishing operations are proximity to other public attractions (including public fishing areas, but not other fee-fishing enterprises), high-traffic zones, and aesthetically pleasing settings.

CLIENTELE

Fee-fishing appeals to all types of anglers, even experienced anglers. However, an important segment of the fee-fishing clientele are the elderly, families with children (including single-parent), and the physically handicapped. These diverse groups offer unique opportunities to encourage fishing while increasing and promoting the consumption of fish.

FACILITY DESIGN

Design of fee-fishing facilities should include considerations for safety, convenience, security, and control of access. Good security design will increase client safety while reducing theft and vandalism. Regulations, prices, hours of operations, and liability statements should be clearly posted. Restrooms and trash containers should be easily accessible and serviced regularly.

Proper pond design for fee-fishing operations should include: multiple relatively small ponds (< 2 acres) with levees that allow vehicular traffic, accessible banks, unobstructed bottoms, overflow drains and emergency spillways, and a good water source (piped to each pond). Multiple ponds allow managers to treat a pond with a disease without losing business, to concentrate fish to improve catch rates, and to isolate fish deliveries so as not to introduce diseases to existing populations. Existing hill-type ponds can be used for fee-fishing but usually present management problems with access and fishing success.

SERVICES

A fee-fishing operation is a people-oriented recreation business that requires the management be "P-R" people and provide concessions that meet all anticipated needs of the clientele. Well-designed and stocked concessions can increase profitability and customer satisfaction. Concessions should include everything from bait to drinks, snacks (even complete meals), tackle, first aid and cosmetics supplies (e.g., sun screen), and clothing (with logo). Fish cleaning services and processed fish for direct sales can also increase profitability and open other niche markets. Many fee-fishing operations have become small-scale processors or fish fry catering businesses.

ADVERTISING

Common advertising methods employed by fee-fishing operations include: road signs, newspapers, radio and TV commercials, fliers, visitor guides, and direct mailings. However, the best advertising is "word of mouth." Aesthetically pleasing surroundings, good concessions, courteous service, and successful angling will bring in both repeat and new customers. Questionnaires suggest that every satisfied customer equals 8 to 10 new patrons.

MANAGEMENT

Critical management considerations for fee-fishing operators include: species selection, hauling and stocking (including density and frequency concerns), feeding, water quality and aeration, weed control, and fish health management.

In warmwater fish operations farm-raised catfish, carp, sunfish (possibly bass species), or tilapia are the best choices for stocking. Stocking wild fish leads to high mortality rates, introduction of diseases, and reduced catch rates. Purchasing fish from aquaculture facilities that have previously serviced fee-fishing operations and using live-haulers that have a proven reputation are the best advice for new managers. Most fee-fishing operations stock 4,000 to 6,000 pounds per acre but research in Georgia has shown that stocking densities as low as 2,000 pounds per acre do not affect catch rates. Fish bite best the first few weeks after stocking. Fish become "hook-shy" over time if left in the same pond; therefore, fish should be periodically seined and moved to other ponds or removed altogether (i.e., processed, etc.).

Feeding of fish, at least at maintenance levels (i.e., ° to 1% body weight) will both maintain the health of the fish and improve catch rates. Fish can be fed every other day or three times per week to reduce labor. Winter feeding is also important to maintain the health of the fish. Fish are probably best fed in the evening, after closing, as long as aeration can be provided as needed through the night. Most fee-fishing operations do not allow the use of minnows or other live fish as bait because of the potential for their release and colonization of the ponds (to the detriment of the desirable species).

Management of water quality in fee-fishing ponds should be similar to any aquaculture facility for that specie. Probably the most commonly recommended or

needed water quality management strategy is maintaining dissolved oxygen above 3 ppm by utilizing mechanical aeration. Many fee-fishing managers have no understanding of dissolved oxygen or water quality dynamics and this offers extension agents and specialists an opportunity to assist them in improving the management and profitability of their operations. Off-flavor is another water quality related phenomenon that is all too common in newly stocked fish, and managers need to learn how to test for off-flavor and manage accordingly.

Restrictions on fishing or other water uses severely limit the utilization of herbicides to control aquatic weeds in fee-fishing operations. Therefore, grass carp (or white amur) are the best alternative in states in which they are legal. Establishing a phytoplankton bloom or applying herbicides early in the season (March or April) before the fee-fish operation opens to the public is another viable management strategy for control of aquatic vegetation.

Predisposed stress or stress due to handling and hauling causes many diseases to appear at fee-fishing operations. Fee-fishing operators must learn to watch for the signs of stress and disease at the hauling truck and in the ponds. Correct diagnosis is another problem at fee-fishing establishments, and managers need to work closely with a qualified diagnostician and precisely follow treatment procedures and withdrawal time on antibiotic treatments.

Finally, fee-fishing managers need to keep good records. These records should include stocking times and rates, catch or removal rates, feeding rates, water quality measurements, and stress or disease problems for each pond. Without adequate records it becomes virtually impossible to manage fee-fishing ponds successfully (i.e., for good catch rates and customer satisfaction).