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Managing Kentucky Fee Fishing Operations

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Abstract: Management strategies for operating fee fishing operations in Kentucky are described. Recommendations are given for stocking rates of catfish, hybrid bream, and trout; aeration, pond depth and shape, supplemental feeding, and other management considerations. Marketing considerations discussed include pricing, and amenities such as restrooms, fish-cleaning services, and concessions including rental or sale of tackle and supplies.

Key Words: catfish, fee fishing, Kentucky, management, marketing, ponds

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There are approximately 175 privately owned fee fishing operations in Kentucky. Fee fishing facilities may often be referred to as pay lakes or fish-out ponds. Fee fishing operations usually consist of one or more ½- to 10-acre ponds. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) requires fee fishing operators to stock a minimum of 1,000 lbs of adult catfish per surface acre of water, at least once a year. The KDFWR charges a license fee of \$125 for the first two pond surface acres. A fee of \$20 is charged for each additional surface acre of pond(s). Registered fee fishing operations are provided with daily licenses for customers. Yearly fishing licenses are required when fishing at non-permitted facilities.

Fee fishing ponds are typically stocked with 1- to 4-lb channel catfish at densities of 1,000 - 4,000 lbs per surface acre. Kentucky fee fishing ponds are often stocked with 300 lbs of fish or more, on a Thursday or Friday. Customers often observe weekly stockings. The fish are bought from live hauler trucks at prices of \$0.70 - \$1.85 per lb. The price of fish paid by fee fishing operations is often dependent on the quantity of fish ordered and the distance they must be transported.

High fish densities and aeration helps insure fishing success. Aeration devices and water testing equipment should be used by operators that stock $\geq 1,000$ lbs of fish per surface acre. Aeration devices should be placed so they can operate effectively but provide as little inconvenience and potential danger to customers as possible. Electric aeration devices rated at 1 hp per acre may be placed on timers and used for supplemental aeration. Larger gasoline or diesel-powered aerators may be more desirable for severe oxygen depletions and other emergency situations.

Typical lakes and ponds may produce 20 - 200 lbs of fish per surface acre. Many of these fish may be undersized or be of an undesired species. Fee fishing lakes provide an alternative fishing resource for those who are not interested in utilizing, or who are unable to utilize, more natural fisheries (Cichra et al. 1994a). Kentucky's fee fishing industry annually imports an estimated 2 million lbs of catfish from other southern states. Roughly 6% of the fish required for stocking these ponds are grown in-state.

Fee fishing operations will accept frequent, small deliveries of variable size fish and provide a local market for beginning and small-scale catfish producers. Fee fishing markets have provided a vital link in establishing the pond-raised catfish industry in other southern states. One or two fee fishing operations exist in many Kentucky counties. Some of these facilities are located near large population centers. However, many successful operations exist in more rural areas. A 1984 fee fishing survey (Cremer et al. 1984) indicated 42% of Kentucky customers fished alone, while 44% fished in family groups. Most customers were male and traveled from local or nearby areas.

Irregular shaped ponds of ½ to 2 acres provide a more natural and aesthetic fishing environment and these smaller ponds are easier to manage. Two or three ponds provide management advantages over a single pond operation. If fish are off-flavor, become diseased, will not bite, or if pond repairs are needed, the business will not be forced to temporarily close while the issue is addressed. Drain structures should be

installed to allow rapid pond draining. Shallow pond areas (<2 feet in depth) should be avoided, since they tend to promote aquatic plant growth. Triploid grass carp may be stocked to control soft-stemmed aquatic plants; however, these fish can reach large sizes and are periodically caught by hook and line. If possible, fee fishing ponds should be constructed with a 3- to 5-foot depth. A smooth pond bottom permits the seining and removal of non-biting fish. The numbers of non-biting, or hard-to-catch catfish has been estimated to be as high as 40% in fee fishing ponds (Cichra 1999).

Good parking facilities and a combination ticket/concession stand should be located at the main entrance. Fee fishing operations should have limited access, for security purposes. Property liability insurance may be considered, or accident release forms should be signed as customers enter the property.

The Kentucky fee fishing season typically runs from the middle of March to early November. Some fee fishing operations are open 24 hours, 7 days a week. Others have limited hours or are open Thursday through Sunday. Businesses charge either a general admission fee of about \$5 to \$7 per day (called "Ticket Lakes"), or charge a lower admission fee of \$2 to \$3 and an additional \$1.25 to \$1.85 per pound for fish caught (called "Pound Lakes"). Selling fish by the pound provides more accurate fish stock records, but it requires an attendant to weigh the fish as customers leave. Customers should be discouraged from returning captured fish to the pond, since they often do not survive.

Bonus ponds may be stocked with hybrid bream or large catfish. Rainbow trout may be stocked during the fall, winter, and spring months when water temperatures remain below 68° F. Bonus ponds have been used successfully to attract fee fishing customers. Stocking largemouth bass, crappie, shad, bluegill, and other fish into fee fishing ponds can make pond management difficult and should be avoided.

Catfish will "take the hook" better if they are fed less than 1% of their body weight per day (Masser et al. 1993). Feeding will allow the fish's immune system to combat disease and to maintain its body weight. Supplemental feeding will keep the fish healthier, making them hungrier. Convincing fee fishing customers of the benefits of supplemental feeding may be difficult. Feeding may especially discourage customers fishing in general admission lakes, as opposed to those lakes which charge by a per-pound basis. Night feeding using a sinking feed, feeding when the operation is closed, or choosing not to feed may be the best management policy, depending on the clientele.

Fee fishing operations make most of their profits from the sale of concession items. Fishing tackle, worms, chicken livers, stink baits, soft drinks, and candy are commonly sold. Fishing rods and reels may be sold or rented. Spinning or spin casting gear is most frequently used. Security deposits may help discourage rental equipment vandalism. Many fee fishing operations use holding tanks to sell additional fish to fishermen or to customers not interested in fishing. Some fee fishing operations will accept food stamps.

Fish cleaning (\$0.25 to \$0.50 per lb of fish) and food vending services are often provided. Adequate restroom facilities are necessary to insure the success of an operation. Consult the county health department about existing regulations regarding these types of facilities. Some fee fishing operations provide alternative activities for non-fishermen such as pony rides, game rooms, playgrounds, camping, etc.

Aesthetics, facility cleanliness, and safety are important details which can determine an operation's success. Providing paved or gravel pond banks that are clear of vegetation near the water's edge will improve accessibility. Benches, picnic tables, shelters, and shade trees may be located a short distance from the pond. Litter containers and life saving gear should be readily accessible. Entrance signs displaying regulations, such as the limit of two fishing rods per fishermen, fish size or quantity limits, and prohibiting the use of alcohol, abusive language etc., are useful management tools.

Many fee fishing operations depend on repeat customers and word of mouth advertising to attract business (Cichra et al 1994b). Attractive roadside signs as well as radio, television, and newspaper advertisements may also attract customers. A fee fishing operation's success will depend on the manager's ability to run a business and manage the public, in addition to managing the fish health. It is important to remember that fee fishing customers expect to catch fish!

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