

Comparing the Preferences of Black, Asian, Hispanic, and White Fishermen at Moraine Hills State Park, Illinois¹

Dale J. Blahna²

Abstract: This paper reports the findings of a study conducted at Moraine Hills State Park outside of Chicago, which is one of the few Illinois state parks that gets a high level of use by ethnic minorities. Personal interviews were conducted with 310 fishermen at two sites within the park: the McHenry Dam, a highly developed recreation area on the Fox River, and Wilderness Lake, a beautiful and very rustic lake in the park's interior. Results indicate that, despite the aesthetics and cleaner water of Wilderness Lake, Black, Hispanic, and Asian fishermen were more likely to fish at the dam, they preferred fishing at the dam, and they travelled farther to get to the park than White fishermen. Site and experience preferences were similar for fishermen of all cultural backgrounds, except that minority fishermen were especially interested in the availability of facilities, and Blacks and Hispanics were more interested in socializing. These results indicate McHenry Dam is an important regional resource for minority fishermen, that they prefer highly developed sites, and that they are willing to travel for preferred recreational experiences.

Differences in recreation participation of ethnic minorities compared to Anglo Americans has been a focus of research for about a decade, yet there are still more questions than answers regarding the reasons minorities use or do not use resource recreation areas. Because few ethnic minorities participate in wildland settings, it is difficult to get preference data using on-site recreation surveys. As a result, several authors have suggested the need to study the recreation behavior and preferences of recreationists in areas where minorities do participate (Washburne 1978, Dwyer and Hutchison 1991).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the behavior and preferences of Black, Asian, Hispanic, and White fishermen at Moraine Hills State Park, a 1700 acre park 50 miles northwest of Chicago. The park has several designated natural areas, and it offers the closest thing to wildland recreation opportunities within an hour drive of Chicago. It also has two distinctly different fishing sites within the park: McHenry Dam, which is a highly developed recreational site on the Fox River, and Wilderness Lake, which is located in the park's interior and contains outstanding opportunities for quiet, solitude and a nature experience. Wilderness Lake is actually a series of three interconnected lakes that contain clean, spring fed water. The area is only used lightly, and fishermen have a short hike from parking areas to the lakes and to a concession stand that serves the area. The McHenry Dam area, which is located on the Fox River, has poorer water quality but is much more heavily used. There is a complete concession area (boat rentals, tackle and license sales, food, etc.), parking and picnicking right up to the water's edge, and many other activity opportunities near by.

Research Methods

Personal interviews were conducted with 310 fishermen in the Park during July, August, and September of 1990. A stratified random sampling process was used to ensure a proportional representation of fishermen from the two fishing locations (dam and lake) and days of the week (weekday and weekend or holiday). Steps were taken to minimize response bias due to length of stay and group size, but we could not control for multiple visit bias.

The response rate for Black and White fishermen was high (85 percent and 88 percent respectively), but the response rate for Hispanic and Asian fishermen was much lower (68 percent and 65 percent). The lower response of these fishermen were the result of language barriers, and it hurt our ability to conduct some analyses by all four ethnic categories of respondents. The final sample contained 194 Whites, 73 Blacks, 18 Hispanics, and 14 Asians.

Results

As expected, White fishermen were significantly more likely to fish at Wilderness Lake; only five respondents (11 percent) at the lake were nonwhites compared to 100 (40 percent) of the respondents at the dam (Chi-square= 15.1, sig=.002). For fishermen that were aware of both sites, ethnic minorities were significantly more likely to prefer fishing at the dam than the White fishermen (Chi-square= 6.53, sig=.04), but not when compared to just those White fishermen interviewed at the dam (Chi-square= 2.0, sig=.368).

General satisfaction ratings were nearly identical at both sites. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being most satisfied, the mean rating was 7.3 at the dam and 7.4 at the lake. Hispanic fishermen were especially satisfied with the experience at McHenry Dam; their mean satisfaction rating was 8.6 compared to 7.0 for Whites, 7.3 for Asians, and 7.5 for Black fishermen (F value=3.28; F prob=.02).

Minority fishermen, especially Blacks and Hispanics, were more likely to travel farther than White fishermen to visit Moraine Hills. Most of the minority fishermen came from Chicago, while White fishermen were more likely to come from McHenry and Lake counties and suburban Cook County (Chi-square= 85.6, sig=.000). This is an important finding, because past research indicates that minorities tend to recreate closer to home (Dwyer and Hutchison 1991). These results indicate minorities will travel for natural resource related recreation under certain circumstances. (In this case, the dam is about an hour drive from the north side of Chicago and two hours from the south side.) Thus, McHenry Dam is an important regional resource for many minorities, but more of a local resource for most of the White fishermen.

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²Assistant Professor of Forest Recreation, Utah State University, Logan.

A 20 item scale was used to investigate preferences for site (natural environment, resource characteristics, facilities, accessibility) and experience attributes while fishing. The natural environment factors were rated the most preferred site attributes, and there were no significant differences by racial subgroup. On the other hand, preferences for specific resource attributes (type and size of fish, etc.) were lower than expected, indicating that this was a nonspecialized group of fishermen. Blacks at the dam were more interested than Whites in catching large fish and fishing in slow moving waters, but there were no other significant findings. The most significant site attribute differences were in preferences for facilities. For the lake fishermen, facilities were felt to be the least important aspects of a fishing experience, but they were one of the most important for ethnic fishermen at the dam. For all three minority subgroups, fishing near parking, bathrooms, and concessions were more important than for the White fishermen. In fact, the minority fishermen rated these items as highly as the items relating to the natural environment. This indicates that, while nature is an important aspect of the fishing experience for minorities, facilities are equally important and not necessarily incompatible with the natural surroundings. (Wilderness Lake also had restrooms, parking, and concession facilities, so it is the highly developed nature of McHenry Dam that appeals to these fishermen.)

Accessibility was the least important of all preference items on the survey, and it was actually ranked significantly lower by Black and Asian fishermen than by White fisherman. Again, this indicates that these minority fishermen are willing to travel for outdoor recreation opportunities if agencies provide the preferred experiences.

The only significant differences in the experience preferences (socializing, relaxation, solitude, and skill testing) were in the ratings of the socializing items. White fishermen rated all four of the socializing items lower than minorities, but there were only two significant differences: Hispanic fishermen rated "to be with family and friends" higher than the White fishermen, and Black fishermen rated "to be with people who share the same interest" higher. The preference scales for socializing may be underestimating the importance of this factor for McHenry Dam fishermen, however, since Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians were all more likely to visit the park as part of a group than Whites visiting the Dam or the Lake (Chi-square= 14.8, sig.=.002). In general, however, the expectations for social and psychological attributes of fishing were very similar for all fishermen.

A final possible explanation for the popularity of the dam with ethnic minorities is that there has been a long history of use of the area by these groups. Nearly 70 percent of the visitors, however, have been coming to the park for less than 7 years, and there were no significant differences by ethnic background.

Conclusions

It is surprising that such a large percentage of fishermen at Moraine Hills State Park are ethnic minorities, especially given the location of the park in a predominantly White, exurban area. Ethnic fishermen were more likely than Whites to (1) travel farther to get to the park, (2) visit the park as part of a group, and (3) prefer facilities and opportunities for socializing. The McHenry

Dam area is especially popular with fishermen in the park. When the parking lot at the dam is full, most people will wait in line for hours rather than fish at Wilderness Lake. Both minorities and Whites who fish at McHenry Dam, view it as supplying a natural experience, despite the fact that it is very highly developed by resource agency standards.

The ethnic minorities fishing at Moraine Hills preferred fishing at the dam compared to Wilderness Lake. We expected this finding, but most of the reasons we expected to find to explain it (similar types of people using the area, opportunities for socializing, accessibility, historical precedence, etc.) did not seem to be as important as the highly developed nature of the site. The fact that minority visitors travelled farther to get to the park, and that there are very few sites in northeastern Illinois that get such heavy use by minorities, indicates that there is a latent demand for these types of fishing areas, and that minority fishermen will travel to use the areas if they are provided.

The Moraine Hills case illustrates that resource agencies can play an important role in providing recreational experiences for ethnic minorities, but it will require a very different approach to the provision of outdoor recreation opportunities. Resource agencies tend to provide many more experiences at the natural end of the opportunity spectrum, rather than the urban end of the continuum. This could help explain the heavy predominance of Anglo visitors in most resource based recreation areas.

Resource managers have justified low use levels by minorities as being the result of a lack of interest on the part of minorities for the types of opportunities provided by the agencies. The case of Moraine Hills State Park illustrates that an equally valid argument can be made that the agencies do not provide the types of experiences preferred by ethnic minorities (and many White fishermen as well). Recreation agencies need to provide a greater diversity of recreational experiences, such as the example provided by Moraine Hills State Park. This will require focusing more on providing recreation in urban and near urban areas, and providing significantly higher levels of recreational development than the agencies typically offer.

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