

# VA Angler R3 Focus Groups



RECREATIONAL  
BOATING & FISHING  
FOUNDATION



TAKEMEFISHING™.org

## RBFF State R3 Program Grants



### Overview

The Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR) and Responsive Management coordinated a research project to learn from new and returning anglers in Virginia to enhance effective recruitment, retention and reactivation (R3) strategies. The project entailed focus groups of new and returning anglers who had fished in Virginia in 2019 or 2020 but not between 2016 and 2018. The objectives of this research project were to deepen the understanding of the audiences' motivations to fish, their constraints to participation and their attitudes related to information needs and urban fishing sites.

The qualitative data that was gathered from the groups provided direction on the right themes, content and strategies that DWR must implement to engage with these audiences and ensure they are retained in future years. The ultimate outcome of this project will be measured by applying this information to R3 efforts. A high-level of success was achieved by committing to a data-driven approach that allowed DWR staff to learn from these important customers.

### Results

New anglers in particular were more female, younger and tend to reside in urban and suburban areas. Many started fishing because they had more time due to the pandemic and enjoyed the camaraderie, relaxation and ability to be close to nature. The focus groups revealed many key barriers that prevented them from fishing in the past or might hold them back from making fishing a priority in the future. One key discovery was new anglers still need basic fishing skills and information. Many new anglers "don't know what they don't know" about various aspects of fishing techniques, locations and even what helpful information is available to them through DWR.

Many people in this study fished in their county of residence and greatly appreciated urban fishing locations that were consistently stocked and had amenities such as parking and fishing piers. This data validates DWR's emphasis on outreach and stocking activities in urban areas but it also revealed criticism about sites that are overcrowded and full of litter.

DWR can now use this information to improve the product it offers at urban fishing sites and increase satisfaction.

### Partners

- Responsive Management
- Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation (RBFF)

### Support

"This project would not have happened without the forward-thinking of our R3 and Human Dimensions staff. The evidence from this research really surprised me and made me think about how we can use this data to inform our outreach strategy. I thank RBFF and Responsive Management for their support of this important endeavor".

-Brian Moyer, Assistant Director of Outreach



A new angler enjoys his catch at one of DWR's urban fishing locations near Richmond. An important revelation of this research was how new and returning anglers enjoy urban fishing sites that are close, clean, stocked with fish, and have amenities like parking and playgrounds for kids.

## Benefits

The most significant benefit of this project is the data from new and returning anglers, which can be applied to outreach and R3 strategies. Another key benefit was partnering with a research firm like Responsive Management. Considering the amount of data that was compiled and how little DWR staff time was needed, focus groups are a small lift. The majority of agency time was spent crafting the project objectives and coming up with what key information was needed from the various audiences. Responsive Management conducted the focus groups, transcribed hours of conversation and provided an in-depth report as the final product. This process can be easily replicated in other states, as long as there is funding.

The focus group report will not only benefit Virginia but the data should also have utility for other states who are interested in learning from similar audience types. Especially in other MidAtlantic States, new and returning anglers will likely have similar backgrounds, motivations, and barriers to participation. This data could be another important tool in the arsenal of a state R3 coordinator, marketer or communications specialist.

View [Virginia DWR's presentation](#) from the RBFF 2021 Virtual State Marketing Workshop for more information.

## Methodology

After finalizing the project objectives and information needs, DWR provided a list of anglers to Responsive Management who had purchased a license in 2019 or 2020 but not in 2016-2018. Once the groups of new and returning anglers were identified, the participants were invited to attend virtual focus groups. Normally focus groups would be conducted in-person but due to the COVID pandemic, the approach shifted to a virtual format. Five focus groups were successfully completed and incorporated new and returning anglers from four different regions of the state, one all-woman group and people who have fished urban fishing sites near Richmond and Northern Virginia. Additionally, there was one focus group that was exclusively returning anglers.

The pandemic also influenced the recruitment of new anglers for these studies and forced the project to rely solely on the fishing license database. While this approach was successful, it did present some challenges and removed the possibility of recruiting non-anglers who have never purchased a license for the study.

*the* **OUTDOORS** *are*  
*Better* **TOGETHER**

DWR is implementing a new communication strategy that includes the overarching theme, "The Outdoors are Better Together." The learnings of the research will help guide messaging tactics to this audience because it aligns closely with new and returning anglers who enjoy the camaraderie and social benefits of fishing.

## Future Plans/Lessons Learned

Despite supplying only new and returning licensed anglers to Responsive Management, their survey revealed that 60% had fished between 2016 and 2018 but did not have a record of holding a license in that time period. The implication from this result is that the license database can be used to identify new and returning anglers but the data cannot be relied upon without additional surveys or other means to screen the candidates to confirm their participation history.

The results will have significant impact for DWR outreach and R3 priorities. For example, a new series of on-boarding emails to new license buyers will better provide the key information they are seeking such as where to go fishing and what techniques to use. New content will fill in additional information gaps through relevant social media channels and direct messaging.

A new communications strategy called "The Outdoors Are Better Together" will reflect the social aspects that these audiences enjoy about fishing. The depth of data from this research will truly be useful to DWR for years to come.

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