

Conservation Funding for Fish and Wildlife in Wisconsin: A 2016 General Public Opinion Survey



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About this Report

As part of the 2015-2017 State Budget, Wisconsin's legislature directed the Department of Natural Resources to consult with stakeholders and prepare a report to the Joint Committee on Finance on a plan to address an imbalance in the state's Fish and Wildlife Account. The department's Social Science Team has gathered, compiled and synthesized social and economic information to help inform the department's efforts in response to this legislative directive. This report is one of a series of documents prepared by the team to provide objective, policy-relevant information. This report presents specific study findings, interprets the information within pertinent contexts, and may identify potentially useful lines of additional inquiry. This report does not, however, include specific recommendations or policy prescriptions.

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Introduction

We developed and implemented a survey of Wisconsin residents' opinions about revenue options to support fish and wildlife management in the state. We asked about their interest in fish and wildlife, recent participation in outdoor activities, and support for various funding options. We characterized respondents based on demographics and specific fish and wildlife-related recreations. We report results and observations from the survey herein.

Survey Methodology

We surveyed 2,000 adults using a stratified, random sample of Wisconsin households with an oversample of people aged 18-40 in anticipation of lower responses from those in that age group. Names and addresses were purchased from a commercial marketing and survey firm. In early April 2016, each person in the sample received a 4-page questionnaire, stamped return envelope and cover letter signed by the Wisconsin DNR Secretary which explained the project. We sent a follow-up reminder letter a week after the initial mailing and then a second complete survey packet to non-respondents two weeks later. We accepted returned surveys for analysis through May 24. A total of 615 completed questionnaires were returned for a 35 percent response rate when accounting for undeliverable mail, refusals and deceased persons in the sample.

Profile of Respondents

We compared the demographic data of our respondents to known population parameters from U.S. Census data and found that our respondents over represented males and people over 35 years old (Table 1). Cases were subsequently weighted by gender and age in our analyses to address this potential limitation. Results pertaining to policy questions presented in this report are based on weighted data. Though our respondents also under represent non-white residents of the state, our sample size did not permit us to do any correction on that basis.

Table 1. *Demographic data for sample respondents compared to U.S. Census data for Wisconsin population.*

Demographic	Sample Respondents	Census Data
Males	62%	49%
Females	38%	51%
18-34 year-olds	17%	26%
35-49 year-olds	22%	26%
50-64 year-olds	30%	28%
65 years and older	32%	19%
Caucasian	95%	89%
Non-Caucasian	5%	11%

Segmentation of Sample

Results to survey questions are generally described for both the entire sample (i.e. the “general public”) and for subsets of the general public that engage in fish and wildlife-related recreations (i.e. specific “segments”). When considering results for any particular stakeholder segment, it is important to remember that terms like “hunters,” “anglers” and “wildlife viewers” do not characterize mutually exclusive groups. For example, over half (54%) of all respondents who fished in the past two years also hunted (Table 2). Among hunters, 87 percent also fished and 37 percent said they participated in wildlife viewing away from home. The percentages of respondents who indicated that they have hunted or fished in the past two years are somewhat higher than we would expect based on previous state estimates. Therefore, these data likely over represent the views of sportsmen in any results described for the “general public.”

Table 2. *Segmentation of sample respondents: percentage of respondents who indicated participating in outdoor recreation during the past two years.*

Segmentation Label	Fishing	Hunting	Wildlife Viewing
Fishing	100%	54%	44%
Hunting	87%	100%	37%
Wildlife Viewing	60%	30%	100%

Survey respondents expressed high levels of interest in the state’s fish and wildlife. Nearly half (49%) rated their interest as “Great” and 38 percent reported “Moderate” interest. Only 12 percent checked “Little” or “No” interest in Wisconsin’s wildlife. Trappers recorded the highest percentage of “Great” interest (94%) in wildlife of any recreation segment (Figure 1). Seventy-seven percent of respondents who both hunted and fished reported “Great” interest in fish and wildlife.

In addition, all respondents were nearly unanimous in their agreement with two statements about the benefits that fish and wildlife provide the state:

- *“I think public lands in Wisconsin benefit all citizens of the state, regardless of whether they visit any public lands.”* (60% strongly agree; 35% agree)
- *“I think that thriving fish and wildlife populations provide a significant benefit to the state’s economy.”* (61% strongly agree; 35% agree)



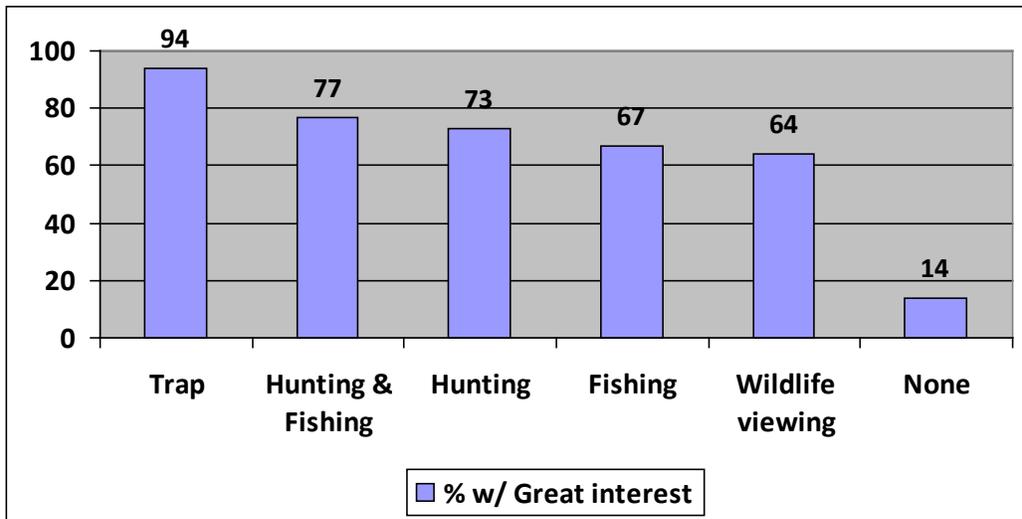


Figure 1. Percentage of respondents who indicated “Great” interest in fish and wildlife recreation.

Respondents were asked about their wildlife-related recreation participation in the state over the past two years. Participation rates were highest for fishing at 56 percent (Figure 2). Thirty-five percent of the respondents hunted in the past two years. Forty-two percent reported wildlife viewing away from home as an activity and 16 percent were wildlife viewers-only, meaning they did not hunt or fish. Almost one-quarter of the respondents (23%) said they did not do any hunting, fishing, trapping or wildlife viewing in the past two years.

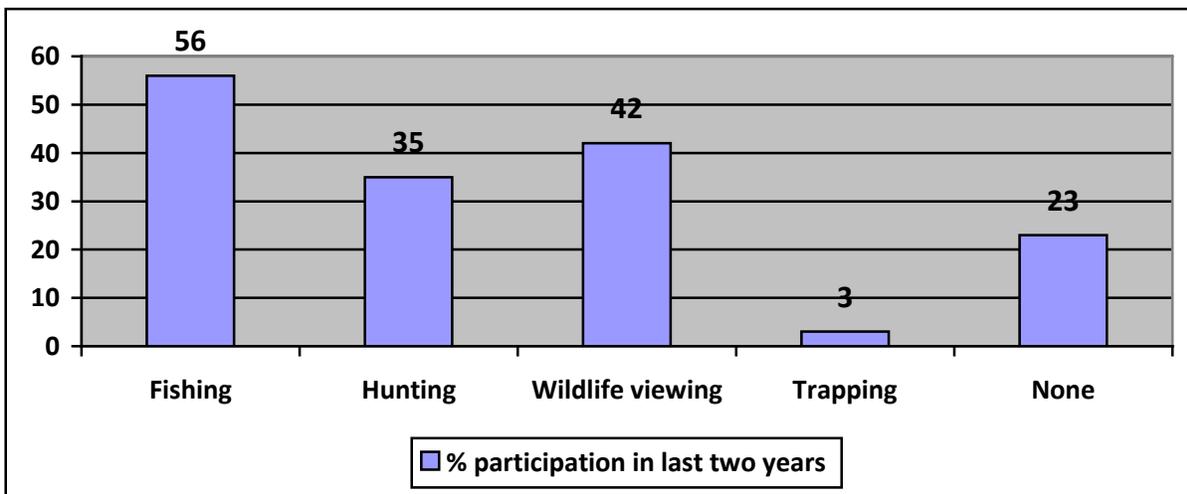


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents who indicated participating in fish and wildlife activities during past two years.

Opinions about Funding Strategies and License Fee Increases

The questionnaire presented five general options for managing the fish and wildlife account and asked respondents about their support or opposition to each option, and then for their most and least preferred choices from the same set of five options. These questions were prefaced with a textbox that provided background information (Figure 3).

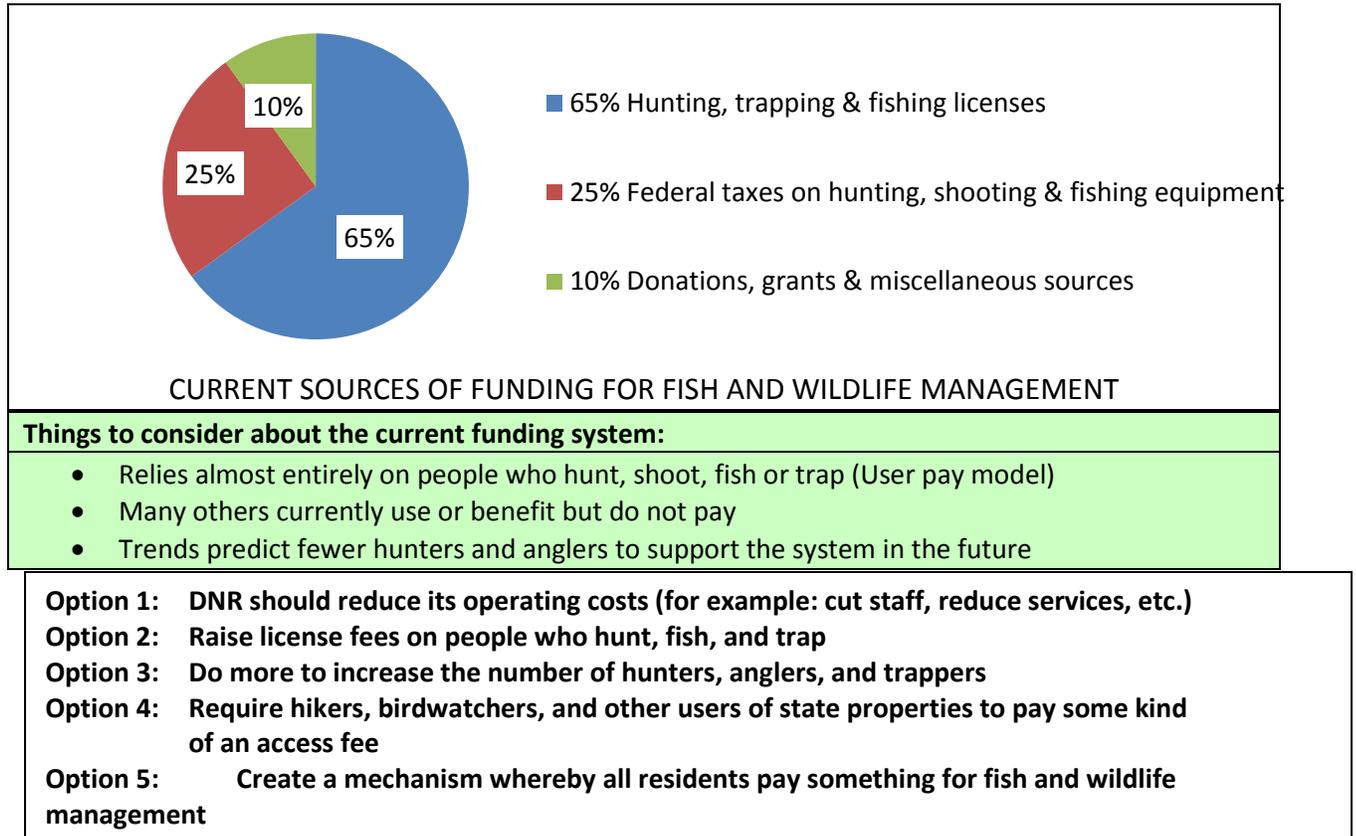


Figure 3. Background information on fish and wildlife funding presented in the questionnaire.

The overall results from the general public did not produce a clear majority for either the most or least preferred options. Option 5—creating a mechanism for all residents to pay—received the highest percentage of most preferred responses with 28 percent (Figure 4). Option 1—reducing operating costs—was identified as the least preferred option by 31 percent. Option 3—focusing on recruitment and retention had the second highest percentage of most preferred selections, and also the highest ratio of most to least preferred (6 to 1) of any option. Observations related to each of the five options are presented below (Figures 5-9).

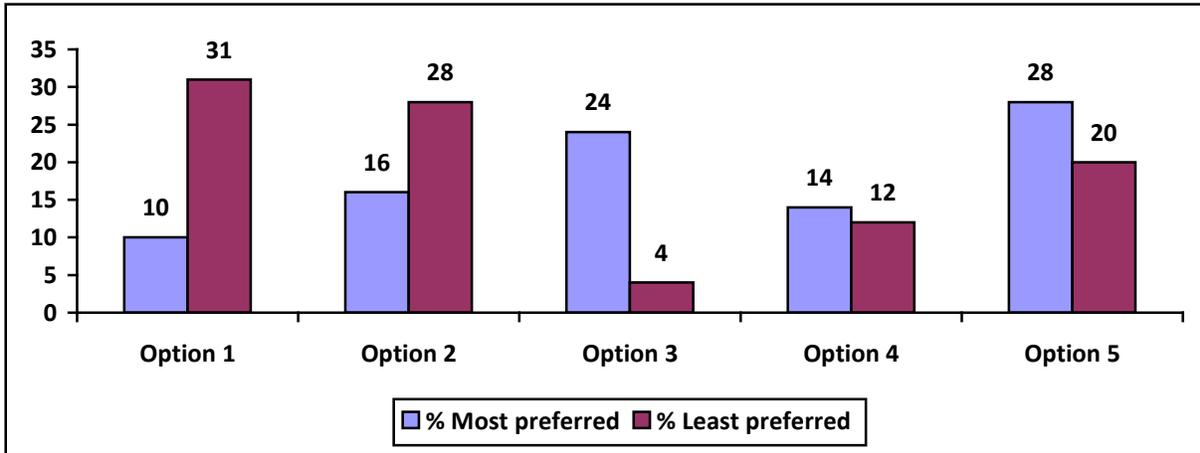


Figure 4. Percentage of responses indicating “most” and “least” preferred options to address fish and wildlife funding.

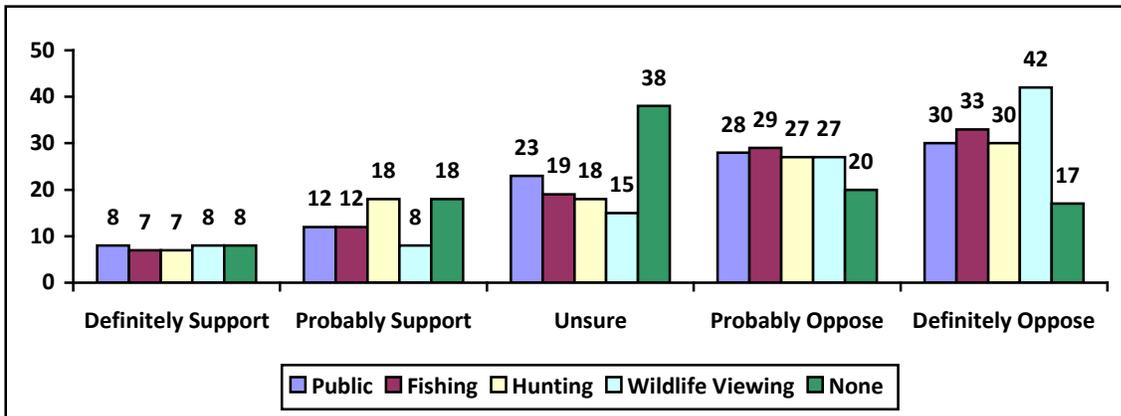


Figure 5. Responses to Option 1—DNR should reduce its operating costs (for example: cut staff, reduce services, etc.).

Observations:

- 58 percent of the general public opposes reduction to Wisconsin DNR operating costs, while 20 percent support more cuts.
- Participation in wildlife viewing was most strongly associated with opposition to this option—42 percent were “Definitely opposed” and 69 percent opposed it overall.
- People who did not participate in any of the wildlife recreations we measured were mostly (38%) unsure about Option 1.

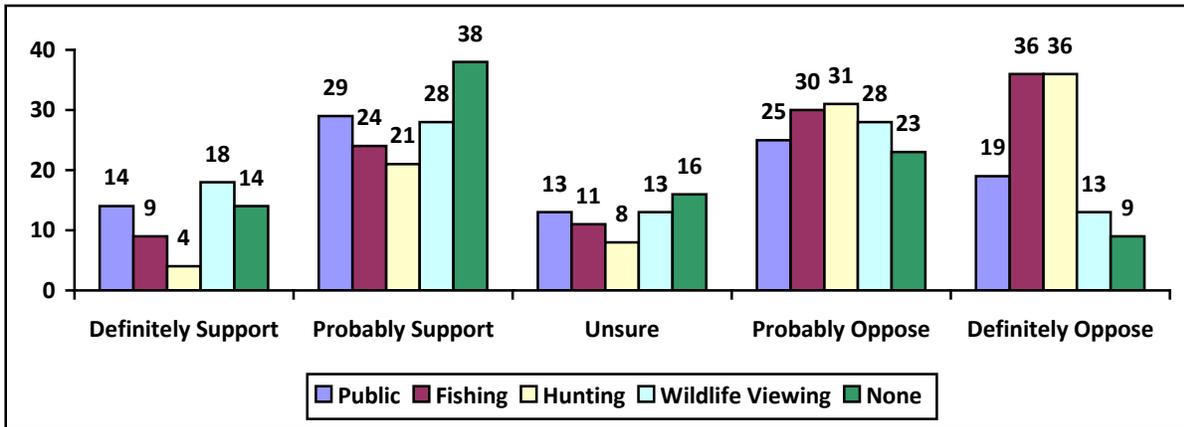


Figure 6. Responses to Option 2—Raise license fees on people who hunt, fish, and trap.

Observations:

- Opinion regarding license fee increases was evenly split among the general public with 43 percent supporting and 44 percent opposing this option.
- A majority (52%) of non-participants supported license fee increases.
- Only one quarter (25%) of hunters supported increasing fees.
- 33 percent of anglers supported this option.

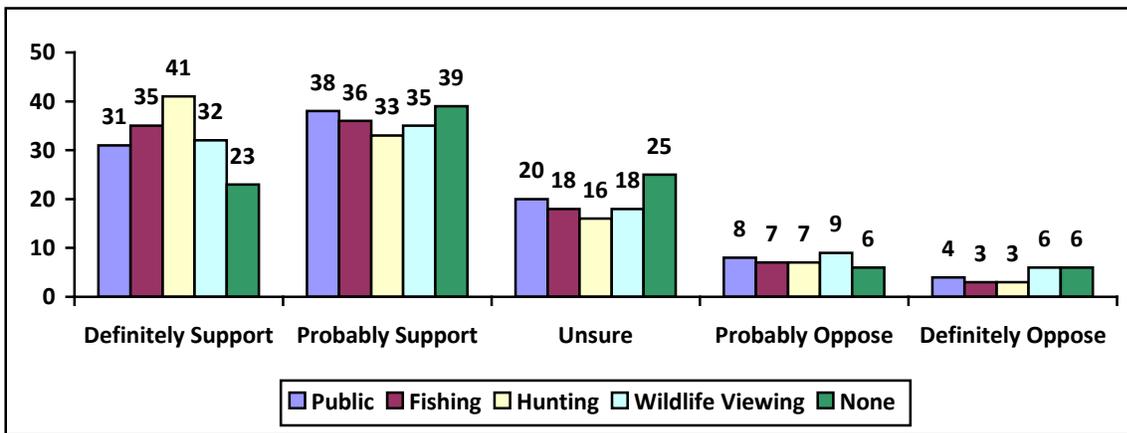


Figure 7. Responses to Option 3—Do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers, and trappers.

Observations:

- Survey results indicate broad support and little opposition across the general public and within groups for efforts to increase the number of participants in hunting, fishing and trapping.
- Support for Option 3 was highest among hunters at 74 percent.

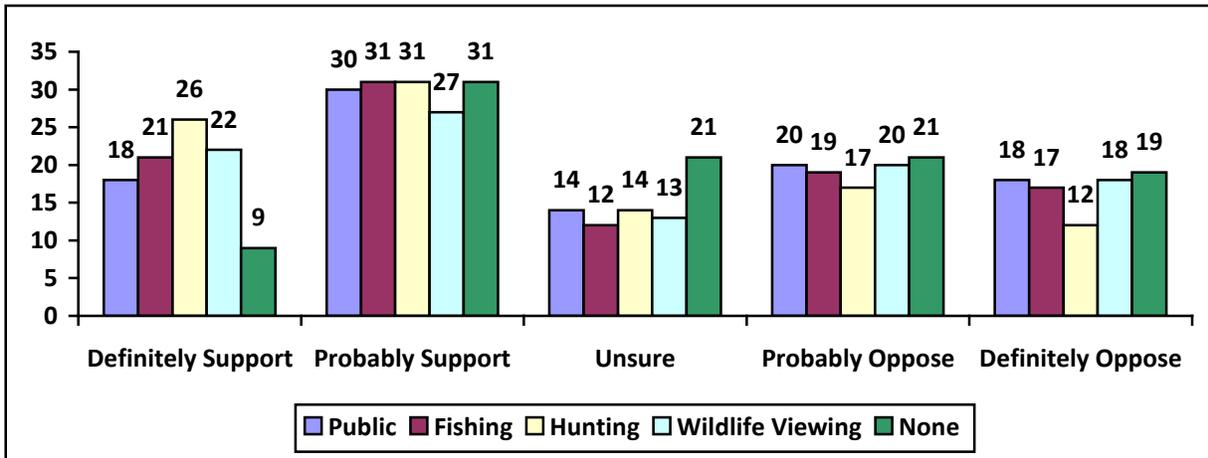


Figure 8. Responses to Option 4—Require hikers, birdwatchers, and other users of state properties to pay some kind of an access fee.

Observations:

- Within the general public, Option 4 received support from about one-half (48%); 38 percent opposed the idea.
- A majority of hunters (57%) and anglers (52%) supported an access fee for birdwatchers, hikers and other users of state properties.

Note: A more specific question about access fees posed later in the questionnaire actually received higher percentages of support.

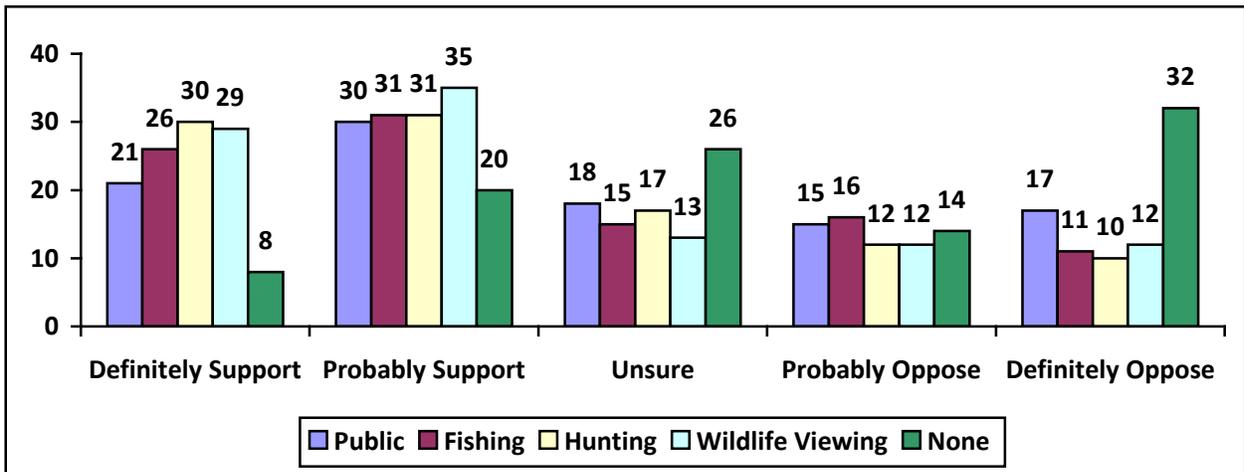


Figure 9. Responses to Option 5—Create a mechanism whereby all residents pay something for fish and wildlife management.

Observations:

- Option 5 received a majority of support across the general public (51%) and among anglers (57%), hunters (61%) and wildlife viewers (64%).
- Forty-six percent of nonparticipants opposed the creation of a broad-based funding mechanism, including one in three who were “Definitely opposed.”

Modeling Factors That Influence Respondents’ Support for Funding Strategies

We assessed factors that may explain respondents’ support or opposition for the most preferred (a mechanism whereby all residents pay something for fish and wildlife management) and least preferred (DNR should reduce its operating costs) funding options using ordered logit regressions. We used a multinomial logit regression to assess factors that may explain respondents’ choices for the most preferred of the five options presented.

Methods

We coded respondents’ level of support for each funding strategy as a three-level ordered variable (suppose, unsure, and oppose). In order to explain respondents’ support or opposition for the most preferred and least preferred funding strategies, unique demographic characteristics of each respondent (gender, race and age) were included as independent variables in the logit regressions. A respondent’s participation in traditional consumptive recreations (*SPORTSMEN*) in the past two years was assumed to be an important factor that would motivate the individual’s level of support for a funding strategy. A variable that captured wildlife and fish resource users who only watched or photographed birds and wildlife away from home (*VIEWERONLY*) was also included in the model. Lastly, we included respondents’ level of interest in Wisconsin’s wildlife and fish resources (*INTEREST*) in the model as an independent variable.

We hypothesized that respondents who expressed interest in Wisconsin’s fish and wildlife resource may be more likely to support funding strategies that would guarantee the existence of these resources in the future. As a result, such a respondent would be more likely to oppose a funding strategy that reduces the DNR’s operating cost and more likely to support a mechanism where all citizens contribute to fish and wildlife funding. On the other hand, individuals who expressed no interest in fish and wildlife resource may be more likely to oppose funding strategies that will impose an unnecessary financial burden on them (i.e. a mechanism whereby all residents pay something for fish and wildlife management). Table 3 summarizes the variables used in the ordered logit regression models.

After assessing respondents’ support or opposition for the most and least preferred options, we also investigated factors that influenced respondents’ choice of their most preferred option. For this analysis, respondents who had no opinions and those who did not prefer any of the five potential funding options presented in the survey were excluded from the model. A multinomial logit regression was used to assess respondents’ choice of the most preferred funding option. Within this model, the least ranked funding strategy (i.e. DNR to reduce its operating costs) among the most preferred options was used as the reference case.

Table 3. Definitions of variables included in estimated models.

Variable	Description	Coding	Mean	Min	Max
REDUCE_COST <i>n= 586</i>	DNR should reduce its operating cost	2= Definitely Support and probably Support 1= Unsure 0=Definitely oppose and probably oppose	0.22	0	1
ALLCITIZENS_PAY <i>n= 583</i>	DNR should create a mechanism where all residents pay for wildlife and fish management	2= Definitely Support and probably Support 1= Unsure 0=Definitely oppose and probably oppose	0.43	0	1
MOST_PREFERRED <i>n= 553</i>	Most preferred funding option	1= DNR should reduce its operating cost (REFERENCE CASE). 2= Raise license fee on people who hunt, fish, and trap (FEE_INCREASE) 3= Do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers, and trappers (INC_SPORTSMEN). 4= Require access fee from hikers, bird watchers and other state property users (ACCESS_FEE). 5= DNR Should create a mechanism where all residents pay for wildlife and fish management (ALLCITIZENS_PAY)	3.38	1	5
INTEREST <i>n= 607</i>	Level of Interest in Wisconsin’s fish and wildlife	2= Great, Moderate and little interest 1= Unsure 0=No interest	0.86	0	1
SPORTSMEN <i>n= 614</i>	Respondents who have participated in traditional, consumptive recreations (both fishing and hunting) within the past 2 years.	1= Sportsmen 0= Non Sportsmen	0.33	0	1
VIEWERONLY <i>n= 614</i>	Respondents who only watched or photographed birds or wildlife away from home within the past 2 years (no other activity included).	1= Yes 0= No	0.14	0	1
RACE <i>n=610</i>	Respondent’s Race	1= White 0= Other Race	0.95	0	1
GENDER <i>n= 614</i>	Gender	1= Male 0=Female	0.62	0	1
AGE <i>n= 614</i>	Age	Years	53.86	19	95

Table 4. Ordered logit regression of respondent's support for the most and least preferred funding options.

	Regression Model 1 (REDUCE_COST)	Regression Model 2 (ALLCITIZENS_PAY)	Regression Model 1 (REDUCE_COST)	Regression Model 2 (ALLCITIZENS_PAY)
Independent Variables	Coefficient (Std. Error)		Odds Ratio	
INTEREST (Unsure)	-0.479 (0.412)	0.412 (0.671)	0.620	1.511
INTEREST (Little to Great)	-1.051 ^a (0.376)	1.562 ^b (0.640)	0.350 ^a	4.767 ^b
SPORTSMEN	0.201 (0.215)	0.487 ^b (0.210)	1.222	1.627 ^b
VIEWER_ONLY	-0.627 (0.321)	0.354 (0.274)	0.534	1.424
RACE	-0.269 (0.323)	0.490 (0.397)	0.764	1.633
GENDER	-0.018 (0.189)	0.127 (0.192)	0.982	1.140
AGE	0.011 ^b (0.005)	-0.002 (0.729)	1.011 ^b	0.998
# obs.	569	576		
LR χ^2	22.52 ^a	42.03 ^a		
Pseudo R ²	0.022	0.040		

^{a,b,c} Statistically significant at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Explanatory variables used in the multinomial logit model included demographic characteristics (age, gender and race), interest in Wisconsin fish and wildlife (*INTEREST*) and whether a respondent participated in traditional consumptive recreational activities (*SPORTSMEN*). Wildlife and fish resource users who only watched or photographed birds and wildlife away from home (*VIEWERONLY*) were also included in the model. Both regression models were weighted by gender and age to account for overrepresentation of the male and older populations in the sample compared to U.S. Census data for Wisconsin.

Results and Discussion

The results of the ordered logit regression models which assessed factors that potentially influenced respondents' support for the most preferred and least preferred funding options are presented in Table 4. The results of the multinomial logit model that explained the respondents' choice of the most preferred funding strategy are presented in Table 5.

Relative to respondents who had no interest in Wisconsin's fish and wildlife resource, those who expressed some level of interest (little interest to great interest) were 65% less likely to support (relative to being unsure or opposed) the DNR reducing its operating costs. On the other hand, older respondents were more likely to support this option. As a respondent's

age increases by one year, the odds of supporting (relative to being unsure or opposed) a reduction in DNR's operating costs as a funding option increase by 1.1%.

For the most preferred funding option (i.e. a mechanism whereby all residents pay something for fish and wildlife management), respondents' level of interest in fish and wildlife was an important factor that influenced their level of support. The odds of an individual who expressed an interest in Wisconsin's fish and wildlife supporting (relative to being unsure or opposed) a funding mechanism whereby all residents pay was five times more than those who expressed no interest. Individuals who participated in traditional consumptive recreational activities (i.e. fishing and hunting) within the past two years (*SPORTSMEN*) were also more likely to support a funding strategy whereby all residents pay something. The odds of a sportsman supporting (relative to unsure or opposed) a funding mechanism whereby all residents pay something was approximately two times more than for a non-sportsman.

As presented in Table 5, relative to respondents who had no interest in Wisconsin's fish and wildlife resource, all things being equal, respondents' who expressed interest in Wisconsin's fish and wildlife were more likely to choose any of the funding options presented (increase license fees; do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers and trappers; require access fees to use state properties; and a mechanism for all residents to pay something) as the most preferred funding option over the strategy that required the DNR to reduce its operating costs.

Compared to respondents who were not sportsmen, all things being equal, sportsmen were less likely to choose a fish and wildlife management funding strategy that increased license fees on hunting, fishing or trapping as the most preferred funding option over the funding strategy that required the DNR to reduce operating costs. Also, sportsmen were less likely to choose strategies that required all citizens to pay something or the DNR to do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers and trappers as the most preferred funding option over the option that required the DNR to reduce operations.

Relative to female respondents, males were less likely to choose the fish and wildlife management funding strategy that required the DNR to do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers and trappers as the most preferred option over the funding strategy that required the DNR to reduce operating costs. Similarly, older respondents were less likely to choose requiring the DNR to do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers and trappers as the most preferred strategy over requiring the DNR to reduce costs of operations.



Table 5. A multinomial logit model of respondent's choice for the most preferred funding options.

	Regression Model (FEE_INCREASE)	Regression Model (INC_SPORTSMEN)	Regression Model (ACCESS_FEE)	Regression Model 1 (ALLCITIZENS_PAY)
Independent Variables	Coefficient (Std. Error)			
INTEREST (Unsure)	1.182 (0.988)	1.021 (1.013)	0.990 (1.267)	-0.101 (1.328)
INTEREST (Little to Great)	1.870 ^b (0.932)	1.974 ^b (0.954)	2.345 ^b (1.165)	3.060 ^a (1.167)
SPORTSMEN	-1.900 ^a (0.508)	-0.910 ^b (0.425)	-0.404 (0.435)	-0.737 ^b (0.406)
VIEWER_ONLY	0.155 (0.561)	-0.688 (0.582)	-0.506 (0.624)	-0.131 (0.541)
RACE	0.145 (0.845)	0.651 (0.801)	-0.307 (0.779)	0.239 (0.771)
GENDER	-0.522 (0.402)	-0.787 ^b (0.390)	-0.498 (0.417)	-0.460 (0.385)
AGE	-0.009 (0.011)	-0.028 ^a (0.010)	-0.005 (0.011)	-0.015 (0.010)
CONSTANT	-0.126 (1.355)	-0.756 (1.316)	-0.648 (1.508)	-0.505 (1.438)

^{a,b,c} Statistically significant at 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively.

Summary of Factors Influencing Respondent's Support for Funding Options

It is evident that respondents' interest in Wisconsin's fish and wildlife resources (*INTEREST*) and participation in traditional, consumptive recreations (*SPORTSMEN*) are two important factors that influenced their support for the most and least preferred wildlife and fish management funding strategies. For the least preferred fish and wildlife management funding strategy (reduce DNR operating costs), respondents' age was an important predictor of those who would be more likely to support this funding strategy.

In the model that sought to explain respondents' choice of the most preferred fish and wildlife funding management strategy, respondents' interest in Wisconsin's wildlife and fish resources (*INTEREST*) and participation in traditional, consumptive recreations (*SPORTSMEN*) were again important predictors of respondents' choice. Moreover, older and male respondents were less likely to choose the funding strategy that required the DNR to do more to increase the number of hunters, anglers and trappers as the most preferred strategy over the option that required the DNR to reduce operations costs.

Priorities for Maintaining, Reducing or Eliminating Services

We also asked survey respondents to identify their priorities for maintaining, reducing or eliminating broad categories of services in the event that future funding was unable to sustain current services. A majority of respondents wanted five different categories maintained at current levels: infrastructure on public land and waters, law enforcement, game species monitoring and management, habitat improvement on state lands, and wildlife education/outreach (Table 6). There was lukewarm support (46%) for maintaining customer services and call centers and considerably less support for monitoring and management of nongame species (39%) and for cooperative services to private land owners to improve habitat (34%).

Table 6. *Priorities for maintaining, reducing or eliminating services.*

Program areas and services	Maintain current level	Reduce	Eliminate	Unsure
Maintaining public use infrastructure on public land and waters (ex. - signage, parking areas and boat launches)	78	16	1	6
Law enforcement of fish and wildlife laws	73	17	2	8
Monitoring and management of game species (wildlife and fish that people harvest)	72	20	2	7
Habitat improvement projects on state lands and waters	64	21	3	13
Wildlife education and information outreach efforts	53	29	7	11
Customer service and call centers	46	38	3	14
Monitoring and management of nongame species (many birds, reptiles, and small mammals)	39	39	10	11
Cooperative services to private land owners for habitat and species management	34	32	3	14

Support for Property Access Fees

In addition to asking about Option 4 above, we posed a more specific property access fee question that defined which properties, specified an amount and required payment of all users. We split our sample so that half of the sample subjects were asked about a \$5 annual fee and the other half were asked about a \$10 annual fee. The question included the following preface: *“State parks and state forests collect vehicle admission fees. The state does not collect fees for use of state natural / fishery / wildlife properties.”*

“Would you approve or oppose the creation of a [\$5 or \$10] annual fee that would be required to access the state’s natural / fishery / wildlife properties (other than state parks and forests)?”

Nearly seven in ten (69%) survey respondents approved a \$5 annual access fee to state properties. Approval of an annual \$10 fee only decreased approval by seven percent. Opposition to a fee was expressed by one in four (25%) respondents who were asked about \$10 and one in five (20%) for the \$5 dollar amount (Table 7). Further, in a follow-up question about whether the implementation of an annual fee would change the likelihood of visiting state properties, the answer was “No” for most respondents who already visit. Eight-four percent would buy the \$5 access pass and 74 percent said they would buy the \$10 fee (Table 7).

Table 7. Support or opposition to an access fee to state natural/fishery/wildlife properties.

Amount	% who would likely pay the fee vs. stop visiting ¹	% of respondents that marked...				
		Definitely approve	Probably approve	Unsure	Probably oppose	Definitely oppose
\$ 5 access fee	84%	35	34	10	10	10
\$ 10 access fee	74%	25	37	14	13	12

¹ Data do not include those people who indicated they wouldn't have visited state properties regardless (19% in five dollar treatment and 23% in ten dollar group)

We asked survey respondents to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement:

“I think access to the state’s natural / fishery / wildlife properties (other than state parks and forests) should be free to everyone.”

Two out of three (67%) Wisconsin residents agreed with this statement. However, approval for a property access fee did not seem to be influenced by this general attitude. Among those who said access should be free, 63 percent also approved of a \$5 annual access fee.

Fishing License Fee Increase

A majority (58%) of the survey respondents said they would favor an increase in the price of an annual fishing license. One in three (32%) state residents was opposed. Among anglers, support for an increase netted 55 percent while opposition was 38 percent. The percentage of anglers with strong opinions on this question was higher for those opposed (26% definitely opposed) than among those who support raising the license price (15% definitely support).

Respondents who supported or were unsure about a fishing license increase were also asked how much of a fee increase they would support. Seventy-seven percent indicate a range between \$4 and \$10; 23 percent checked \$2. Four dollars was the most frequently selected amount drawing 35 percent of the responses. Dollar value preferences among anglers were not statistically different.

When asked about a \$5 dollar increase in the price of a fishing license, 58 percent of the general public said they would pay the additional \$5. Anglers expressed stronger support for a \$5 license fee increase than the general public: 76 percent of anglers said they would pay the \$5 increase while 20 percent of anglers said they would stop buying a license.

Deer Hunting License Fee Increase

A majority (57%) of the general public indicated support for increasing the price of a deer hunting license. More hunters, however, opposed (49%) a hunting license increase than supported one (43%). One in three hunters (33%) said they were “Definitely opposed.”

Among hunters who supported or were unsure about a license fee increase, a majority (55%) chose \$2 or \$4 as the maximum amounts. Only 16 percent of deer hunters were willing to pay \$10 more for a license. Lastly, when asked about the potential effect of a \$6 dollar increase (to \$30) on hunters’ decisions to purchase a deer hunting license, results indicate that two out three (68%) hunters would buy one anyway.

Summary

Wisconsinites care about the state’s fish and wildlife; nearly nine in ten (87%) adult residents are either greatly or moderately interested in Wisconsin’s fish and wildlife resources. Further, results indicate that the general public believes healthy fish and wildlife populations are beneficial to the state’s economy and that all people, regardless of a person’s engagement in outdoor recreation, benefit from public lands. This value Wisconsinites see in their state’s fish and wildlife is confirmed by the majority of respondents requesting DNR program areas and services to be continued at the same level for five out of eight program area categories.

The general public also believes in equity, meaning everyone should pay. When presented with five funding options to fund fish and wildlife, a mechanism whereby all residents pay something for fish and wildlife management was the most preferred strategy. Although raising license fees and creating an access fee for state lands were also frequently ranked as least preferred funding options, more pointed questions suggest people would still be willing to pay these increased fees. Further support for the “everyone should pay” perspective was high approval for an annual access pass to the state’s natural/fishery/wildlife properties. Regardless of a \$5 or \$10 annual fee, more than two-thirds of respondents approved. Also, a majority (58%) of the general public supported an increase in the annual fishing license fee; a majority of anglers (55%) supported the fee increase. A similar percentage of the general public (57%) supported an increase in the deer hunting license but more hunters opposed the increase (49%) than supported the increase (43%).