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Research Summaries

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Activities at Free Public Water Access Sites

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Introduction

Minnesota has more than 2,200 free public water access sites available for the 700,00 pleasure boats registered in the state. How often do boat owners use these public water access sites? Do owners of waterfront property use public access? What activities besides boat launching do boat owners engage in at these sites?

To obtain answers to these and other questions related to the quality of boating in Minnesota, a statewide survey of registered Minnesota boat owners was conducted in 1988 by the University of Minnesota and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR), funded by the DNR. The research summarized in this report is based on a survey of 2,490 boat owners, projected to the entire population of Minnesota registered boat owners.

A description of the study design and methods appears at the end of this report.

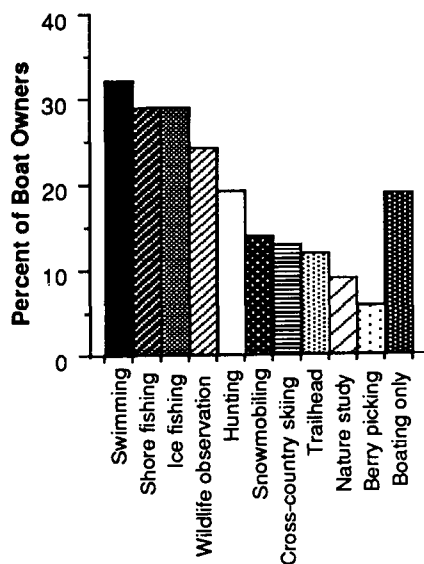


More Than Just a Launch Ramp

Minnesota boat owners use the state's free public water access sites for more than simply launching a boat. Approximately three out of four Minnesota registered boat owners used a public water access at least once in 1987. The most frequent boating outing of half of Minnesota's boat owners is likely to involve use of a public water access. On average, public access users launch their boats six times a year at a total of three different public access sites.

Eighty-one percent of the population also use public access sites for activities other than boating. Over 32% of the state boat owners use public water access sites as places for swimming (Figure 1). Between 24% and 29% of the owners use water access sites for shore fishing, ice fishing, and wildlife observation. Activities pursued by 10% to 19% of the state boat owners at public water access sites include hunting, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and trailhead access (access to hiking, biking, and off-road vehicle trails). Approximately 5% to 9% of the boat owners use public water access sites for nature study and berry-picking. A total of 28 additional activities are pursued at public access sites by less than 3% of the state's registered boat owner population.

Figure 1. Activities of Minnesota boat owners at free public water access sites



Regional Variation

Boat owners in the southern region are more likely than statewide boaters to use a free public water access during an outing that occurs within 49 miles of home. Owners in all three regions of the state (north, metro, and south) are about equally as likely to engage in activities other than just boating at a public water access site. However, there is some regional variation in the mix of activities likely to be pursued (Figure 2). For example, compared to all boat owners in the state, those in the south region are more likely to use public access sites for swimming, shore fishing, and wildlife observation. Owners in the north region are more likely to use free public

Figure 2. Regional distribution of activities by Minnesota boat owners at free public water access sites

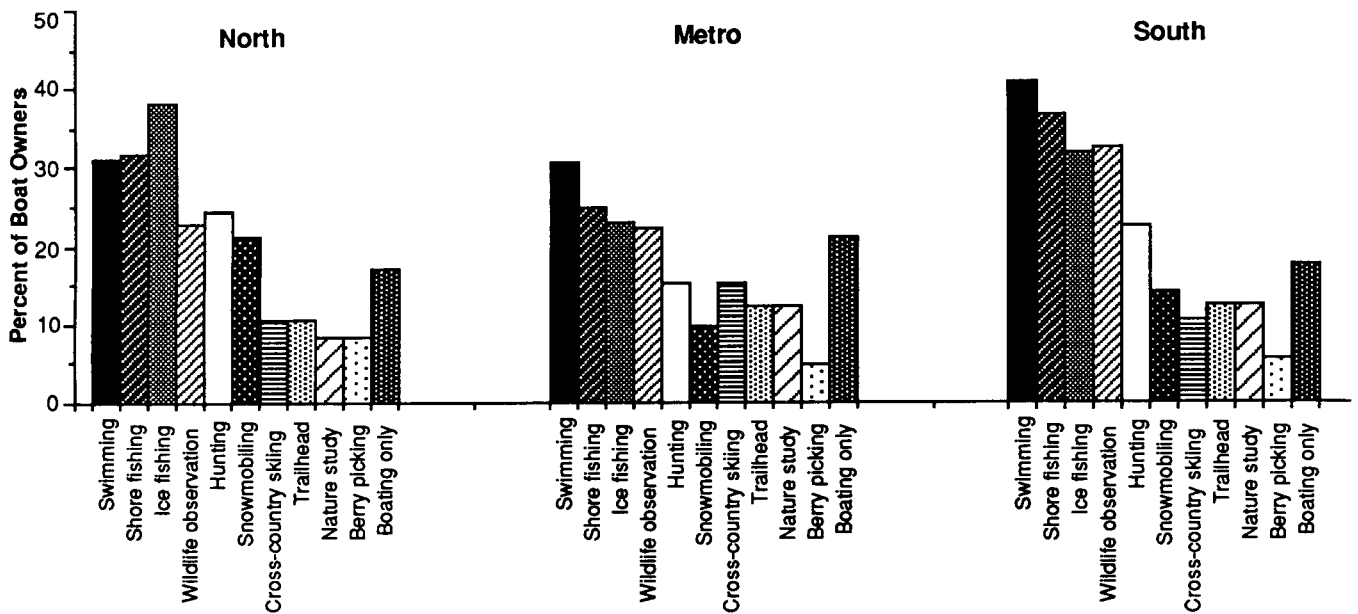


Figure 3. Characteristics of Minnesota boat owners based on frequency of free public access use

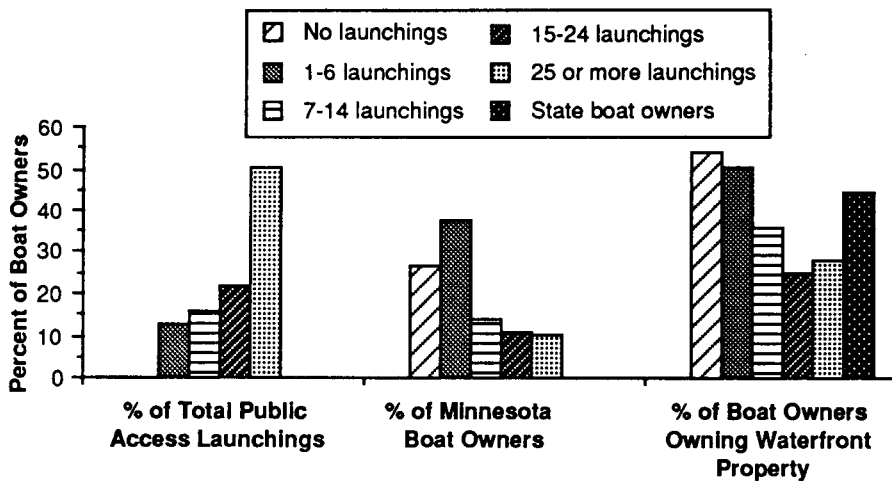
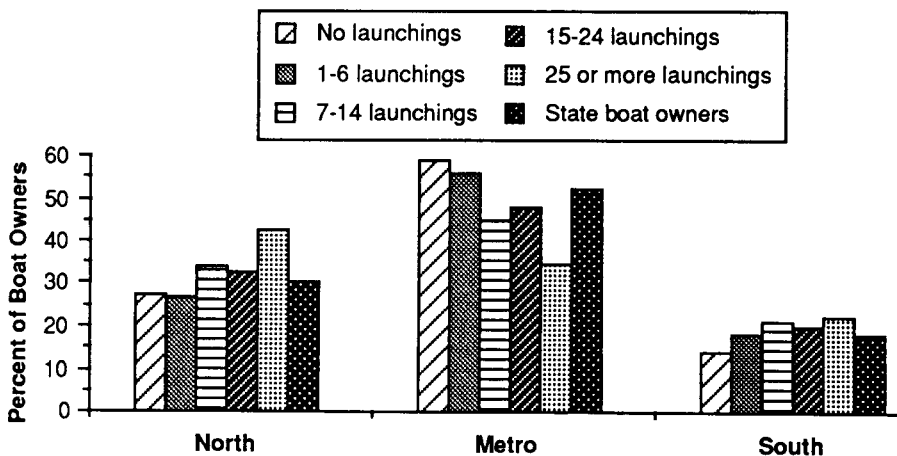


Figure 4. Frequency of free public access use among boaters, by region



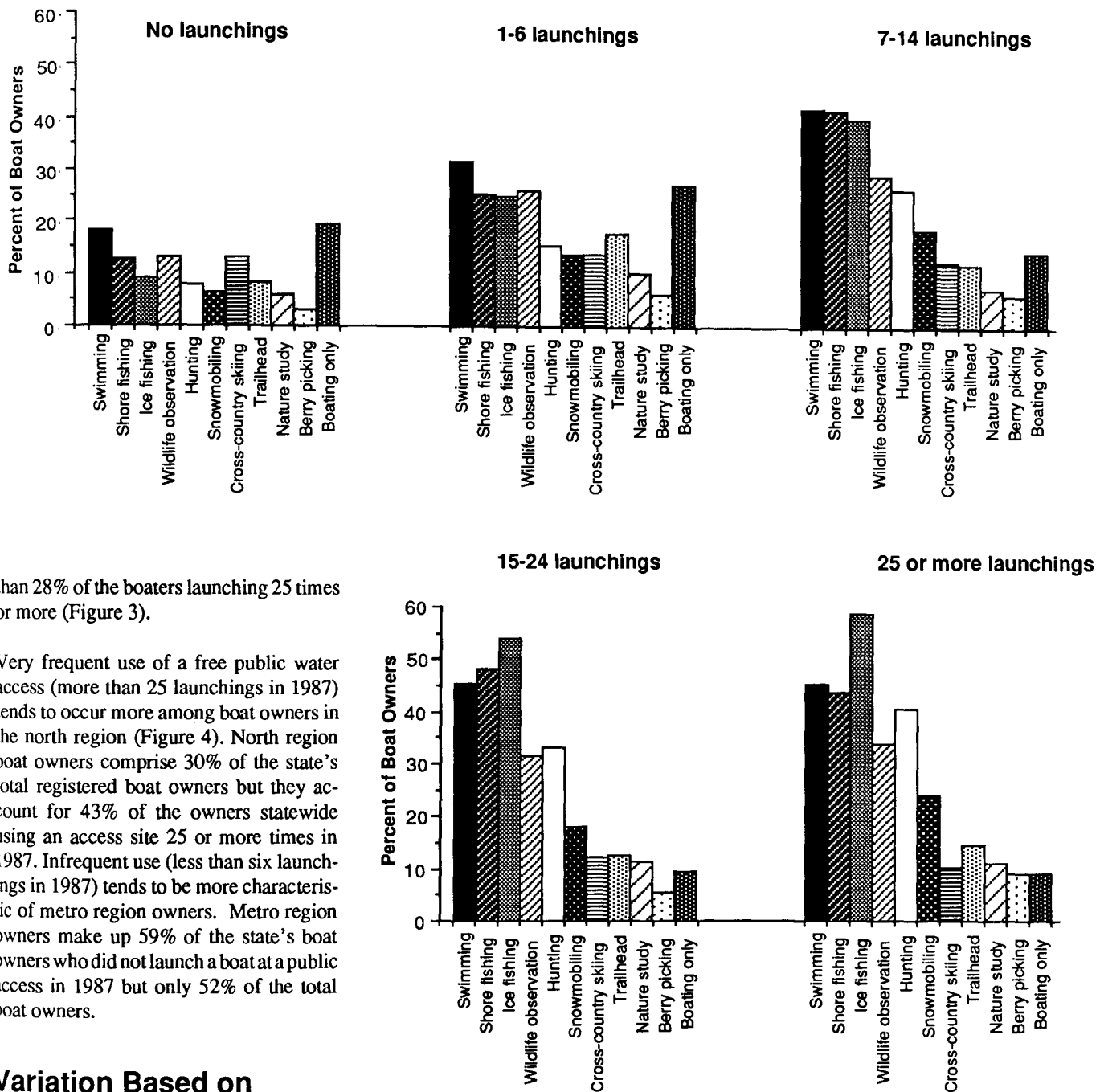
access sites for ice fishing, snowmobiling, and hunting. Metro region boat owners are less likely to use access sites for ice fishing. Variation in public water access site use between regions is greatest for swimming (40% in the south vs. 30% in the metro region), shore fishing (36% south, 25% metro), ice fishing (38% north, 23% metro), wildlife observation (32% south, 22% metro) and snowmobiling (21% north, 10% metro).

Frequent Users

A large percentage of free public water access use involves a relatively small segment of boat owners who visit the sites frequently. For instance, 87% of all public water access launchings in 1987 involve people who launched a boat from a public access seven or more times (Figure 3). Of the state's boat owners, 35% launched their boats at a public access seven or more times in 1987. Over half of the public water access launchings in 1987 are attributable to the 10% of the boat owners who launched a boat at a public access more than 25 times.

People who frequently launch a boat at a free public water access tend not to own waterfront (lakeshore or riverfront) property. Waterfront owners account for 54% of the boat owners who did not launch a boat at a public water access in 1987 but less

Figure 5. Distribution of free public water access site activities by boat owners, based on frequency of boat launchings



than 28% of the boaters launching 25 times or more (Figure 3).

Very frequent use of a free public water access (more than 25 launchings in 1987) tends to occur more among boat owners in the north region (Figure 4). North region boat owners comprise 30% of the state's total registered boat owners but they account for 43% of the owners statewide using an access site 25 or more times in 1987. Infrequent use (less than six launchings in 1987) tends to be more characteristic of metro region owners. Metro region owners make up 59% of the state's boat owners who did not launch a boat at a public access in 1987 but only 52% of the total boat owners.

Variation Based on Frequency of Use

Figure 5 displays the mix of activities pursued at public water access sites by boat owners categorized on the basis of the number of their 1987 public access launchings. The percentage of boat owners using a public water access for boating only decreases from 27% for those launching at a public access between one and six times in 1987 to less than 10% for those boat owners

having 25 or more public access launchings in 1987.

As the frequency of public access boat launchings increases, the percentage of owners engaging in swimming, shore fishing, ice fishing, wildlife observation, hunting, and snowmobiling also increases. The

percentage of state boat owners engaging in swimming and wildlife observation doubles between owners with no 1987 public access launchings and those with 25 or more launchings. The percentage of boat owners engaged in hunting and ice fishing increases fivefold and sixfold, respectively, between owners with no 1987 public

water access launchings and those with 25 or more launchings.

The percentage of owners engaging in cross-county skiing, hiking from trailhead, nature study, and berry-picking does not change dramatically from boaters who report no 1987 public access launchings to boaters reporting 25 or more launchings.

Conclusions

The findings in this study suggest that free public water access sites constitute a special type of park whose principal function is more complex than simply providing a place to launch a boat. Public water access sites provide a frequently used "place at the lake" for boaters who do not own waterfront property, especially among those residing in northern Minnesota.

Planning for the development and use of free public water access sites must recognize that the role of access sites in recreational boating involves more than just providing access to Minnesota's water bodies. Public water access sites are settings for place-specific activities such as swimming, shore fishing, wildlife observation, and hunting. They also serve as year-round staging areas for transitory activities such as ice fishing, hiking, snowmobiling, and cross-country skiing.

Because public water access sites provide settings for recreational opportunities other than water access, planning and management of access site use must provide and maintain facilities to accommodate the broad spectrum of use that occurs at access sites. Planning must try to prevent conflict among the myriad of activities at an access site. Management must be prepared to resolve conflicts among water-based activities, among land-based activities, and between water and land activities.

Waterfront property owners tend not to use free public water access sites. They are likely to be unappreciative of access site use spilling over onto their property and ungrateful for the additional water surface use associated with access site development. Strongly separating access sites from adjacent properties through fencing or

planting screens and locating and orienting major access site facilities away from adjacent homes are examples of precautions that might help reduce conflict between public water access users and abutting waterfront property owners.

Since free public water access sites provide settings for a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities, access site planning and management could be coordinated with the planning and management of other park and outdoor recreational facilities. Outdoor recreational opportunities may be more efficiently provided by coordinating facilities provided at a specific public water access site with the total outdoor recreational opportunity needs of nearby residents of the area where the access site is located. Coordinating the planning and management of public water access facilities with other elements of comprehensive park and open space systems will also improve the efficiency of providing outdoor recreational opportunities.

Summary

Over 80% of Minnesota's registered boat owners use access sites for a set of activities that is not limited to just boating. Boaters throughout the state use free public water access sites for almost 40 activities in addition to launching a boat. Free public access sites are used year-round, with heaviest wintertime use occurring among boaters residing in the northern region.

Among state boat owners, fewer than one in five uses public water access sites only for boating; one in three also uses public access sites for swimming; one in four uses access sites for shore fishing, ice fishing, and wildlife observation; one in five uses access sites for hunting; and one in eight uses access sites for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and as a trailhead for hiking or biking.

Over half of all launchings at public water access sites involve the 10% of the state boat owner population who launch their boats 25 or more times a year. Over one third of the boaters launching more than 25 times a year at a public water access also use the access sites as settings for swimming, shore fishing, ice fishing, wildlife observation, and hunting. Frequent users of public access sites are less likely than the state boat owner population to own lakefront or riverfront property

1988 Survey of Minnesota Boat Owners—Study Design and Method

Access to Minnesota's lakes and streams is provided through many private and commercial facilities as well as through innumerable public canoe launches, beaches, and open stretches of shoreline. More than 2,200 free public water access sites are managed by federal, state, county, and local governments. Minnesota's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) manages nearly 1,200 of these sites.

Although a primary DNR activity is acquiring access to water bodies statewide, recent discussions have focused on managing these resources to better serve the boating public. What should the future direction be for managing the state's water resources to offer safe and rewarding boating opportunities?

In 1987, the authors, the University of Minnesota, and five units of the DNR (Boat and Water Safety, Fisheries, Planning, Trails and Waterways, and Waters) entered into a partnership to conduct a statewide survey of registered boat owners to determine how boaters use their pleasure boats on Minnesota waters and what they think about problems and issues related to boating. The study investigated these concerns for the state's waters as a whole and with specific reference to two of our largest water resources—the North Shore of Lake Superior and the

Mississippi River downstream from the Twin Cities.

In March and April, 1988, a mail-back questionnaire was sent to a representative sample of 3,200 registered boat owners drawn from the pool of 286,000 pleasure boat owners in the state licensed through the DNR. The survey sample was selected to enable comparisons to be made among the three regions of the state displayed in Figure 5, and among six major types of licensed pleasure boats: canoes and kayaks, other boats under 14 feet in length, sailboats 14 to 20 feet, sailboats more than 20 feet, other boats 14 to 20 feet, and other

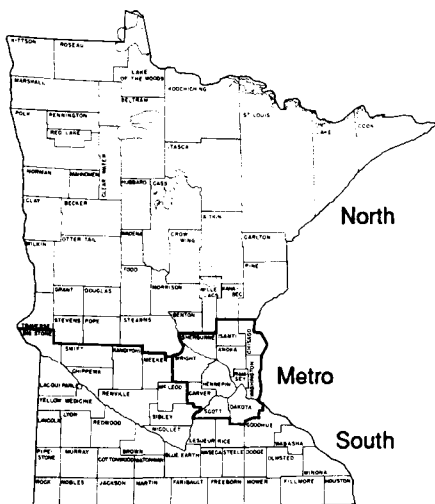
boats more than 20 feet in length. Other comparisons, such as those between boat owners who own or do not own riparian property, are also possible.

The questionnaire was comprised of 45 questions and took about 15 minutes to complete. The initial mailing and two follow-up reminders resulted in 2,490 owners returning the survey. About 100 surveys were eliminated from the original sample of 3,200, resulting in an overall adjusted response rate of 80 percent. This excellent response reflects Minnesota boat owners' strong interest in expressing their views, as well as the importance they place on the state's free public water accesses to achieve quality boating experiences.

Survey respondents may not be representative of the typical boat owner. The survey questionnaire requested the individual in the household "who goes boating most frequently" to respond to the survey. Therefore, the typical survey respondent may be somewhat older and a more experienced boater than the state's typical boat owner or boater.

Details about the study design and methods, the raw data, and the data summary tables are available from the authors and from the DNR's Office of Planning, 500 Lafayette Rd., St. Paul, MN 55155-4010 (612-296-0565).

Figure 6. Study regions



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