

Retained Anglers Key to Utah's Fishing Future

Jordan W. Smith, Ph.D.

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Hooked for Life: Long-Time Anglers Hold the Key to Reviving the Fishing Tradition

On a quiet weekend morning, you may see families and friends casting lines at your local lake, enjoying a pastime that remains popular across the United States. Fishing license sales and participation rates have remained [relatively stable over recent years](#), reflecting enduring enthusiasm among dedicated anglers. Yet beneath this stability lies a challenge: how can we ensure future generations continue to value and participate in fishing?

Recent research led by our team of faculty, staff, and students within the Institute of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism here at Utah State University offers an intriguing path forward. Our study suggests the key to maintaining and growing angler participation lies not merely in recruiting new anglers without connections to fishing, but in empowering existing, passionate anglers to mentor newcomers.

Why do some anglers drift away from the sport? This research highlights three main barriers or "constraints":

- **Interest Constraints:** Many individuals simply lose interest or never develop a strong passion.
- **Time Constraints:** Busy lifestyles can make regular fishing trips seem impractical.
- **Structural Constraints:** Practical issues like costs, limited access, or complicated regulations can deter participation.

Interestingly, our team found that a lack of interest was the most significant barrier. Anglers who stopped fishing typically did so because their initial enthusiasm was not strong enough to motivate them to overcome practical challenges. Conversely, the most dedicated anglers—those consistently renewing their licenses—reported fewer difficulties with structural barriers. Their passion for fishing helped them navigate hurdles like distance, cost, and crowded waters.

Most notably, the research highlighted the crucial role retained anglers play as informal mentors. Our findings show that dedicated anglers actively encourage family and friends, particularly children, to fish. Indeed, 91.5%

of anglers surveyed first experienced fishing as children, guided by family or close friends. This early exposure can create a lifelong passion, suggesting that the most effective recruiters of new anglers are those already deeply engaged in the sport.

Traditional recruitment efforts, such as broad media campaigns and occasional "learn-to-fish" days, often fail to create lasting interest. Without personal connections, fishing rarely becomes a long-term pursuit. Our study challenges conventional recruitment methods, suggesting agencies should shift focus from broadly attracting newcomers with no fishing connections to actively supporting experienced anglers in mentorship roles. How can agencies effectively leverage this valuable resource? We recommend a few practical strategies:

- **Facilitate Family and Mentor-Friendly Opportunities:** Host family-focused fishing events at accessible, well-maintained locations. Stocked community ponds, family-friendly docks, and enhanced amenities can encourage seasoned anglers to introduce fishing to their children and friends.
- **Mentorship Programs and Incentives:** Establish formal programs pairing experienced anglers with novices or returning anglers. Provide incentives such as discounted licenses for mentor-mentee pairs or public recognition for consistent mentors.
- **Simplify Licensing and Regulations:** Offer group or "buddy licenses" and simplify regulations to reduce entry barriers for first-time anglers. Easier access encourages mentors to invite newcomers without administrative hurdles.

By empowering dedicated anglers, fisheries agencies can harness deep-rooted social connections to foster sustainable growth in participation. This approach aligns with [successful public health strategies](#) where peer influence proves more effective than broad marketing campaigns.

Imagine a veteran angler teaching her granddaughter to fish at a well-stocked local pond, sharing skills and creating cherished memories. Such personal, meaningful interactions can spark lifelong engagement, preserve cherished traditions, enhance conservation funding, and strengthen community bonds.

Long-time anglers, those truly "hooked for life," represent a powerful and underutilized resource. Agencies now have both the evidence and opportunity to pivot recruitment strategies towards fostering mentorship and empowering those naturally positioned to inspire future generations. For anglers and agencies alike, the next cast could indeed be the most significant one yet.

Further Reading

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- Rempel, W., Lamborn, C. C., Miller, Z. D., & Smith, J. W. (2025). [Exploring angler participation: The role of constraints, negotiation strategies, and crowding responses](#). *Fisheries Research*, 288, 107454.