

MarinaNet

Great Lakes Collegium

Summary Proceedings

The National Sea Grant Network held its first MarinaNet Research Collegium in Dallas, TX, and a regional conference in Chicago, IL. At both events, representatives of marine trades and regulatory agencies addressed issues facing marine industries. This document summarizes key issues from both of these events, highlighting special concerns facing the marina trades in the Great Lakes.

Introduction

MarinaNet, a national initiative of the National Sea Grant Network, is a multi-state network for the efficient exchange of information and experience between academia, the marina industry, regulatory agencies, and other marine-related organizations. The project has resulted in linkages between Sea Grant, the marine trades, major national and state marina associations, and regulatory agencies.

Sea Grant's work with this industry—whether in economic impact research, advice on pollution prevention, computer spreadsheets useful to small waterfront businesses, or information on a local fishery concern—has helped identify common problems and communication needs. And problems seem to be increasing, as conflicting demands for access to the coast increases, as regulations become more stringent, and as profit margins decline.

Sea Grant therefore created MarinaNet in 1995 as a communication network among these various sectors of the marina industry, governmental regulators, and academia. Primarily via the Internet and a newsletter, MarinaNet enables all these folks to stay in touch. They learn about new research and technology, innovative policy solutions and business practices, and helpful publications, workshops, and conferences. An e-mail discussion group enables folks to pose problems and share solutions on a daily basis.

MarinaNet Goals

1. Link individual Sea Grant programs with marine-related activities into a nation network to facilitate easy access to research, advisory, and outreach activities, and to make the network available to the marine industry and regulatory agencies.
2. Encourage marine personnel and their clients to use a proactive and economically sustainable approach to the aquatic environment.
3. Serve as a conduit of research information between academia and the marine trades; to encourage the emergence and application of best management and marketing practices; and to respond to the continuing demographic changes along the nation's coastline in a way that balances public and private access to coastal resources.

Conducted by
Michigan Sea Grant and New York Sea Grant College Programs
Chicago, Illinois / September 13, 1997

National Marina Trade Issues

In March 1997, Sea Grant convened the network face-to-face at the National MarinaNet Research Collegium, held in Dallas, Texas. The purpose of the collegium was to identify existing problems that will grow in severity and unrealized opportunities that will grow in value over the next five years.

Eighty-three participants deliberated for two days, addressing marketing and business management, new technology, economic impacts, environmental and regulatory issues, and education. Even though participants deliberated in independent focus groups, common critical issues emerged. These issues are described below.

Respond to Changing Demographics

The Nation's changing demographics and economics requires a mind-shift on who marina clientele are and what they want. Approaches are needed that maintain and enhance relationships with existing clientele, while attracting newcomers to recreational boating. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on reaching women, the physically challenged, and people of color. Marinas must transition away from only a place to park and service a boat toward providing a lifestyle platform for family oriented recreational experiences.

Provide More Education and Training

Boaters must be given more exposure to education in safe boating and environmentally responsible behaviors. Boaters need to receive critical information such as safety, weather, and environmental practices at the marina prior to getting underway. Marina operators and owners need better training in risk management. Use of emerging information technology (Web sites, Cable/Web TV) is needed to provide timely education.

Quantify and Articulate the Industry's Economic Impacts

It is difficult to identify and track small retail and service enterprise growth, turnover, and other measures. Standard methodologies must be developed at both the national and state levels for determining, quantifying, and articulating boating industry economic impact and valuation data. Those in the marina trade need access to economic impact models that are interactive, easy-to-use, quick, and low cost.

Raise Awareness about Industry Value

The marine trade industry must continue to collect, organize and disseminate information about the industry's value and impact on our economy, environment, and sustainable use of our shorelines. This information is invaluable for wise decision-making about marina siting, expansion, and management. A national campaign is also needed to clarify the positive role the marina industry plays in providing public access, and to promote the value of recreational boating.

Develop and Manage the Industry's Human Resources

The success of the industry relies on having a pool of trained specialists; mechanisms must be created to provide economical in-service training of existing staff. Changing labor laws are creating disincentives for employing large numbers of specialized service staff. Trade associations should provide leadership in developing training programs.

Boost Communication, Cooperation, and Ties within the Industry

The national recreational boating industry is composed of numerous fragmented sectors which lack adequate mechanisms for communication. Communication difficulties are exacerbated by having to interface with multiple layers of government. Mechanisms such as the MarinaNet Collegium can bring industry leaders together to plan for the future and to "speak with one voice."

Critical Issues in the Great Lakes

The National MarinaNet Research Collegium provided a clear call to action. But the question inevitably arose: did the consensus of the national group adequately reflect regional issues? To find out, Michigan Sea Grant and New York Sea Grant convened the Great Lakes MarinaNet Collegium. In attendance were representatives from marina services, manufacturing, and regulatory agencies.

Participants validated all the issues identified at the national collegium. However, several issues unique to the Great Lakes emerged. The following issues represent the unique challenges and opportunities faced by the marina industry in the Great Lakes region.

Increase Federal Support for Dredging

Most Great Lakes harbors are small recreational harbors, and federal dredging activities tend to focus on large commercial harbors. Great Lakes harbors can no longer rely on the Army Corps of Engineers for dredging, but must turn to the private sector. This places an added financial burden on harbors. Federal support for dredging can be expected only if better work is done to quantify the economic value of recreational harbors. This value can be substantial, but is currently not deemed in the national interest.

Address the Impact of Changing Lake Levels

Fluctuating lake levels, rising and falling in yearly and long-term cycles, present different problems than the ocean coasts, which experience predictable and short-term tidal changes. Changing lake levels affect the amount of dredging that is required, as well as periodic installation of sea walls and other shoreline structures. The historical extremes of lake levels must be taken into account in harbor planning.

Find Ways to Expand Profit Margins

Great Lakes marinas often find themselves facing a slim profit margin. This is at least partially due to the Great Lakes' location in northern latitudes, which results in a Memorial Day to Labor Day season. The short season results in slim profit margins, difficulty keeping well-trained, efficient personnel on a seasonal basis, and greater maintenance costs related to ice formation.

Use Great Lakes Specific Marketing

Many of the marketing suggestions that came out of the National Collegium may not be effective in reaching some segments of Great Lakes boaters due to the high percentage of trailered boats. The owners of trailerable boats tend to do their own repairs, order equipment from a catalog, buy gas from an automobile service station, and drive 20 extra miles to find a free boat ramp. Marina owners need to think more innovatively to serve these boaters. They might consider attracting them by providing free launch ramps, maps to launching sites, and boating education services.

Reduce Conflicting Environmental Regulation

In the Great Lakes, as in some other areas, more than one state, city, or other entity may have jurisdiction over a body of water. Conflicting regulations present constant problems for the shipping and marina industries. Better governmental coordination across watersheds is needed. The marina industry could proactively encourage coordination by suggesting solutions. All need to recognize that a clean environment is key to a successful marina industry, which serves recreational boaters and anglers dependent on high-quality water.

Increase Education

Education can be used as a marketing tool, expanding the boating market by increasing the number of people who feel comfortable boating. It is in the self-interest of marinas to take more responsibility for education, perhaps by developing an industry standard and providing training for both new and current boat owners.

Great Lakes Collegium Recommendations

Participants in the Great Lakes MarinaNet Collegium ended the meeting by validating the major national perspectives outlined in the proceedings of the National MarinaNet Research Collegium. Participants also identified specific actions the marine trade can take to further identify and analyze the Great Lakes issues in this report, and to create coordination and collaboration among the various sectors of the marina industry in the Great Lakes.

Create a Marine Advisory Council

Attendees at the Great Lakes workshop talked about how issues could be further analyzed and resolved. They felt that the development of a council, consisting of the representatives of industry, regulators, boaters, and other members of the marine trade, would enable issues to be discussed by people empowered to make or propose changes. It was emphasized that such a council should not be used by any participant as an opportunity for confrontation; rather the council would provide an opportunity to solve issues. In the words of one attendee, "People must be dedicated to solutions." Many participants agreed that the advisory council could provide guidance on the following overarching issues:

- Establish watershed based management and regulation.
- Recognize issue of seasonality in management and decision-making.
- Identify specific training needs of marinas and boaters.

Sea Grant Involvement

Workshop attendees encouraged Sea Grant to stay involved in resolving the issues brought forward. Participants cited Sea Grant's successful independent role in fisheries and other Great Lakes issues as a model for moving the marina industry forward on these issues. Participants identified a role for Sea Grant to include: sponsoring economic impact studies, gathering and developing educational materials that give both do's and don'ts, and coordinating training programs.

Industry Communication

Fostering continued communication will be key. Sea Grant should continue to bring together the diverse elements of the marine industry with the regulatory and planning agencies that influence their businesses. The ultimate beneficiaries will be boating consumers and the water environment they enjoy.

Additional Information about MarinaNet can be found using these sources:

MarinaNet Internet site: <http://seagrants.orst.edu/crt/index.html>

MarinaNet Research Collegium: Proceedings. Full report of the National meeting in Dallas, TX.

The Future of the Marina Industry. Discussion of issues facing the marina industry.

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The Michigan Sea Grant College Program, a cooperative program of the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, is designed to support greater knowledge and stewardship of the Great Lakes. Funding is through the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the state of Michigan.

MICHU-SG-97-200