



Ohio Sea Grant

A PROFILE OF LAKE ERIE CHARTERBOAT CLIENTS

Technical Summary
OHSU-TS-017

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August 1988 - The Ohio State University



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The Ohio Sea Grant Program is administered by the Center for Lake Erie Area Research (CLEAR) within the College of Biological Sciences at The Ohio State University. CLEAR also administers Franz Theodore Stone Laboratory.

Funding Support

This publication is a result of work from research project R/ME-9. Ohio Sea Grant Program is partially supported through grant NA84AA-D-00079 from the National Sea Grant Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S Department of Commerce, State of Ohio, Ohio Board of Regents and The Ohio State University.

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A PROFILE OF LAKE ERIE CHARTERBOAT CLIENTS

by Leroy Hushak and Golam Mohammad

Chartering is increasing rapidly in Ohio's portion of Lake Erie. Beginning in 1975 with 25 licensed captains, the number of licensed charter captains reached 250 in 1980 and exceeded 700 by 1986. The number of charterfishing hours increased from 53,000 in 1975 to 250,000 in 1980, and to 963,000 in 1986 (Anonymous, 1988).

In 1987 charter hours increased by 26 percent over 1986 to 1,200,000 hours. However, even with this large increase, charter hours are still only 11.8 percent of total boat hours spent fishing on Lake Erie.

	1975	1980	1986
Charter Captains	25	250	>700

Lichtkoppler et al. (1987) report economic and demographic characteristics of charter operators and their businesses. In this paper we discuss characteristics of the people who hire the services of charter firms and the preferences of these people for their lake experience. We report results from 291 respondents who completed a questionnaire about their charter and other fishing experiences during 1986.

In order to obtain our sample we first contacted 50 percent of the 707 licensed charter captains on our mailing list in late 1986. We asked these captains to either randomly select and send us the names and addresses of 15 percent of their customers or to randomly select and send questionnaires to 15 percent of their customers. Of 170 captains responding, 65 agreed to participate, with seven sending us names and addresses and 58 agreeing to forward prepackaged questionnaires with return envelopes to their customers. We direct mailed 97 questionnaires to customers and 752 to the remaining 58 captains in early February, 1987. A repeat mailing was completed about one month later.

We received a total of 327 responses from the 849 questionnaires distributed for a response rate of 39 percent. Of the 327 responses, 36 were headboat only customers in 1986 and are not included in the results presented here. A point to keep in mind is that all respondents are members of at least one charter captain's mailing list and may not be representative of all charter clients.

TABLE 1
Distribution of Charterfishing Trips
among Survey Respondents (N=291)

Mean: 3.4 trips; Range: 1-28 trips

# of Charterfishing Trips	# of Respondents	Percentage
1	93	32.0
2	75	25.8
3	49	16.8
4	25	8.6
5-6	20	6.8
7+	29	10.0
Total	291	100.0

TABLE 2
Distribution of Noncharterfishing
Trips by Surveyed Charterfishing
Customers (N=291)

Mean: 3.9 trips; Range: 0-103 trips

# of Noncharterfishing Trips	# of Respondents	Percentage
0	158	54.3
1	25	8.6
2	22	7.5
3-4	29	10.0
5-9	21	7.2
10-15	20	6.9
16+	16	5.5
TOTAL	291	100.0

Fishing Trip Frequencies

Charterfishing customers took an average of 3.4 charterfishing trips to Lake Erie during 1986, with a range of 1 to 28 trips (Table 1). About 75 percent of the respondents took three or fewer trips. Of the respondents, 85 percent reported at least one trip during 1985; in other words, potentially 15 percent of the respondents were new customers. About 86 percent of the respondents reported having a favorite captain with whom they have fished for an average of four years. Of the 196 respondents who took two or more trips during 1986, the average number of captains used was 1.8 with a range of one to twelve. Nearly 24 percent of respondents came from outside of Ohio. Two percent of respondents considered themselves to be beginning anglers while 5 percent considered themselves to be experts. The remaining 93 percent were either experienced or somewhat experienced.

These same charterfishing clients reported taking an average of 3.9 noncharterfishing trips to Ohio's portion of Lake Erie during 1986, with a range of 0 to 103 trips (Table 2). Only 46 percent of the respondents took these noncharterfishing trips, 54 percent took no other fishing trips to Lake Erie. We asked respondents to report the frequency of fishing trips by five-year intervals from the time they were born to the time of the survey. The alternative responses were at least once per week, at least once per month, several times per year, once per year, and did not fish. The mean response to this question was several times per year.

In Table 3 we report total trips taken by the 291 respondents during 1986 to six different types of locations, including Lake Erie, and by charterfishing and noncharterfishing trips. Other than Lake Erie fishing trips, the most common response was noncharterfishing trips to local sites. These 1,894 trips were taken by only 32 percent of the respondents. In other words, 68 percent of respondents did not fish at local sites.

TABLE 3

Number of Charterfishing and Noncharterfishing Trips to
Ohio's Lake Erie by Zone (N=291)

Zone	# of Charterfishing		# of Noncharterfishing	
	Trips	Percentage	Trips	Percentage
1 (Lucas)	75	7.6	56	5.0
2 (Ottawa-Erie)	705	71.8	261	23.0
3 (Lorain)	147	15.0	324	28.7
4 (Cuyahoga)	25	2.5	244	21.6
5 (Lake-Ashtabula)	30	3.1	245	21.7
Total	982	100.0	1130	100.0

Respondents were asked to report the frequencies of Lake Erie fishing trips by five zones (Table 4). The most frequent site of charterfishing trips by far was the Ottawa-Erie County area with nearly 72 percent of total trips. However, noncharterfishing trips were about equally distributed among the four regions east of Lucas County. This pattern suggests that many customers of the charterboat industry come from Eastern Ohio along Lake Erie. Further improvements in the central basin fishery may result in the drawing away of western basin customers to central basin locations.

TABLE 4
Number of Charterfishing and Noncharterfishing Trips to Various Locations (1986) (N=291)

Locations	# of Charterfishing Trips	# of Noncharterfishing Trips
Ohio's Lake Erie	980	1136
MI, NY, PA, or Canadian Lake Erie Sites	34	130
Other Great Lakes Sites	31	53
Local Sites (Less than 20 miles)	45	1894
Marine (salt water sites)	56	59
Other Sites	19	322

Desired Charter Characteristics

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of ten characteristics of the charter captain and his equipment on a scale of one (not very important) to five (crucial). The two most highly rated characteristics were hospitality extended to customers and the captain's ability to locate fish (Figure 1). Charter customers are generally on the lake to have a good time. This usually involves catching fish, but it does not necessarily mean limiting out. It especially does not involve having a limit largely caught by the captain.

The least important characteristic of the captain is advertising (Figure 1). This is understandable because 85 percent of the respondents were repeat customers and do business by reputation and word of mouth. However, since up to 15 percent of customers are new clients to the industry, advertising may be more important in attracting first time customers than its low rating indicates.

Of the boat characteristics, safety features on the boat ranks the highest (Figure 2). However, all five characteristics rate as very important. These responses suggest that charter customers want to be safe and want to be in a pleasant environment.

Level of Importance of Charter Captain Characteristics to Customers

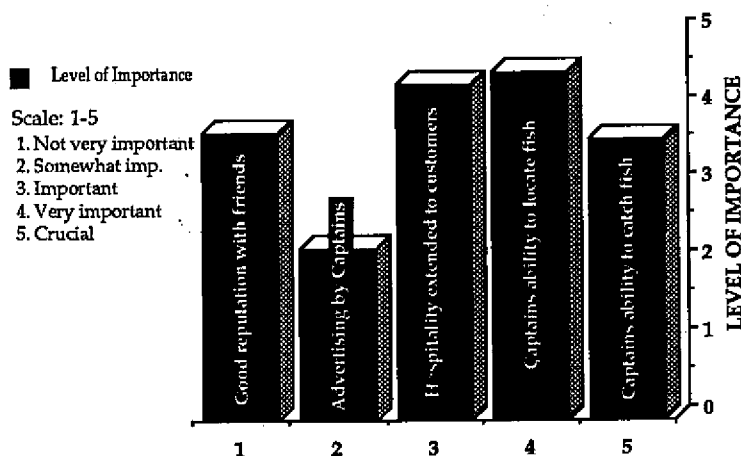


Figure 1 CHARTER CAPT. CHARACTERISTICS

Level of Importance of Charter Boat Characteristics to Charter Customers

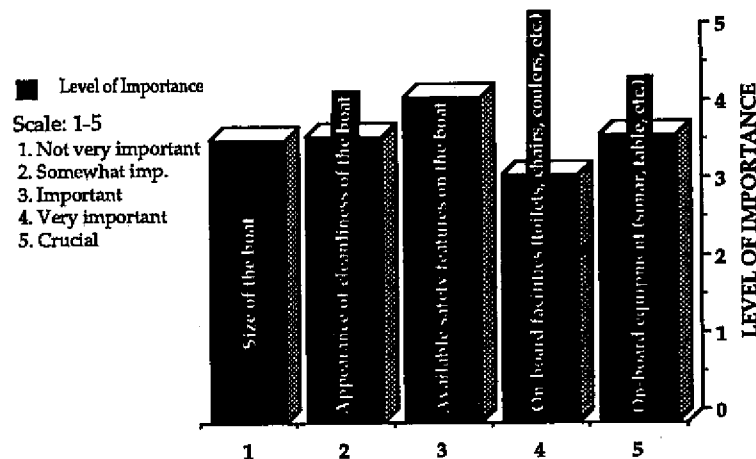


Figure 2 CHARTER BOAT CHARACTERISTICS

Trip Characteristics

Most respondents reported one-day trips, with a mean trip duration of 1.3 days. The longest reported trip was eight days (Table 5). Since the focus of this sample was on six passenger charters, the mean size near six is expected. It is influenced by a few large groups and several very small groups. The mean distance traveled of 115 miles is skewed by a few very long trips. The largest numbers of respondents traveled 60 to 120 miles one-way.

TABLE 5
General Characteristics of Charterfishing Trips

Trip Characteristics	Mean	Range (per trip)	
		Minimum	Maximum
Duration of Charterfishing Trips (N=287)	1.35	1	8
Number of Persons in a Trip (N=286)	5.65	1	18.3
Distance (in miles) Traveled from Home to Lake Erie Fishing Site (N=286)	114.70	8	458.0
Hours Spent by Each Party Organizing a Charterfishing Trip (N=229)	4.50	0	100.0

Of the 4.5 hours spent by the typical party in organizing the trip, the average respondent reported incurring 3.4 of these hours. About 95 percent of the respondents reported reserving a charterboat before beginning the trip. About 90 percent said they traveled to and from the lake by the fastest route, which we interpret to mean that the trip was for charterfishing only.

A large majority of charter clients have incomes between \$24,000 and \$56,000 (Figure 3). While evidence from Michigan (Mahoney et al., 1985) and Wisconsin (Lubner et al., 1987) suggests that charterboat customers have higher incomes than private-boat anglers, this distribution suggests it is not true of charter clients in Ohio. This income distribution suggests that customers can afford a nice trip, but do not want excessive luxury. Only those in the right tail of the income distribution are respondents who are likely to purchase executive trips.

The cost of the charter service offered by the charter captain averages \$282 per 1.3 day trip (Table 6), or about \$217 per day. The mean expenditure for the charter service per person is nearly \$52 per trip, or about \$40 per day. The sum of costs per person is nearly \$109 per 1.3 day trip, or \$84 per day. The respondents reported paying more than their proportionate share of the costs of a trip.

Catch and harvest statistics are provided in Table 7. The mean harvests slightly exceed the daily bag limit for walleye, but it must be kept in mind that these are per 1.3 day trip. Nearly all respondents (98 percent) caught walleye. In these statistics, we do not discriminate between walleye and yellow perch trips, but average them together. Fifty-four percent of the respondents reported harvesting exactly six walleye; most party harvests were between 31 and 40 walleye.

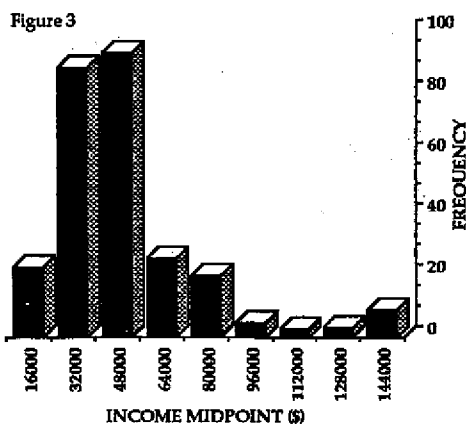


TABLE 6
Trip Expenditure Pattern for Charterfishing Trips

Expenditure Category	Mean Expenditure	Range (per trip) Minimum - Maximum	
Charterfishing Costs per Party (N=258)	281.8	28.33	900.00
Charterfishing Costs per Person (N=237)	51.7	6.25	206.25
Lodging Costs per Person	8.9	0.00	116.70
Costs of Bail, Fishing License, Lures, etc. per Person (N=155)	16.5	0.00	350.00
Expenditure on Restaurants, Bars, Night Clubs per Person (N=170)	17.0	0.00	140.00
Expenditure on Groceries per Person (N=142)	8.0	0.00	36.10
All Other Expenditure per Person (N=88)	6.8	0.00	183.33

TABLE 7
Catch and Harvest Pattern of Different Species by Charter Customers

Species	Party Catch		Party Harvest		Individual Harvest	
	Avg. Catch per party	Range per party	Avg. Harvest per party	Range per party	Avg. Harvest per respondent	Range per respondent
Walleye (N=265)	38.8	0-550	33.2	0-396	6.1	0-48
Yellow Perch (N=284)	13.2	0-183.3	11.0	0-300	2.9	0-67
White Bass (N=285)	3.2	0-160	1.3	0-99	0.6	0-75

Concluding Comments

Charterfishing continues to grow. It can grow further because it is still less than 12 percent of total sport fishing by boat in Ohio's portion of Lake Erie. A major potential source of new customers is private-boat anglers, given the high cost of owning and operating a boat which is safe on Lake Erie.

New customer attraction is important to the charter industry. Up to 15 percent of respondents were new customers of the industry in 1986. Charter clients span the full range from sport fishing novices to experts at angling. Helping inexperienced anglers learn how to catch fish may be one of the most effective business tactics available to the charter captain. Diversification of trips to include activities such as trips to the islands and other non-fishing activities may be effective in developing business with family members of the charter clients who are not avid anglers.

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