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Background

The Department of Natural Resources is developing a master plan for over 200 of its properties encompassing 35,000 acres along trout and smallmouth bass streams in the Driftless Area. As part of the planning process, the DNR drafted an extensive background document (a “regional and property analysis” or RPA) describing the properties, habitat quality and potential, the fisheries, and future challenges in the Driftless Area. Before beginning development of the master plan, the DNR sought public reaction to the RPA and input and guidance on priorities for future management and protection efforts. This document summarizes public comments obtained from a series of nine public open house meetings held at locations around the state (March 11 - 28, 2013) and a month long on-line survey.

Methods

Public open house meetings were held in: Baldwin, Eau Claire, Black River Falls, LaFarge, Baraboo, Dodgeville, Belmont, Fitchburg, and Waukesha. Over 140 people attended the meetings. Participants were asked to provide input through three primary means: (1) answers to a series of questions on comment cards, (2) provide place-based suggestions, questions, or comments on large, wall-sized maps, and (3) advise the DNR on future land acquisitions through a “Driftless Dollars” game designed to identify priorities related to different aspects or approaches to land acquisition. The on-line survey was designed to mirror the types of input sought at the open house meetings and consisted of 17 multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions. The survey was advertised and disseminated widely through a variety of mechanisms:

- A link to the survey was placed on the Driftless Area Master Planning website.
- A link to the survey was directly emailed to 550 people who signed up to receive information and updates about the Driftless Area Stream Master Plan (though the “GovDelivery” system). This list was developed over a period of 12-months through:
 - ⇒ A sign-up link on the website,
 - ⇒ pre-paid post cards attached to posters that were widely displayed throughout the region, and
 - ⇒ presentations at meeting throughout the region.

In total, 547 people responded to the on-line survey. Each response was anonymously received and each respondent was randomly assigned a number to link each person’s responses. A total of 73 comments were provided on the large maps, most of which were related to two general themes: 1) future acquisition priority areas (fee and easement); and 2) identifying areas in need of habitat improvement. In addition, the Department received nine letters or emails describing peoples’ or organizations’ suggestions, concerns, and perspectives on the planning project.



Results

About the respondents

Based on the zip codes of the respondents' primary residential address, 71% lived in urban settings (zip codes in or encompassing population centers greater than 10,000 people) and 29% lived in rural communities or smaller cities (zip codes in or with population centers less than 10,000 people). The adjacent map shows the distribution of where respondents live.

RECREATION ISSUES

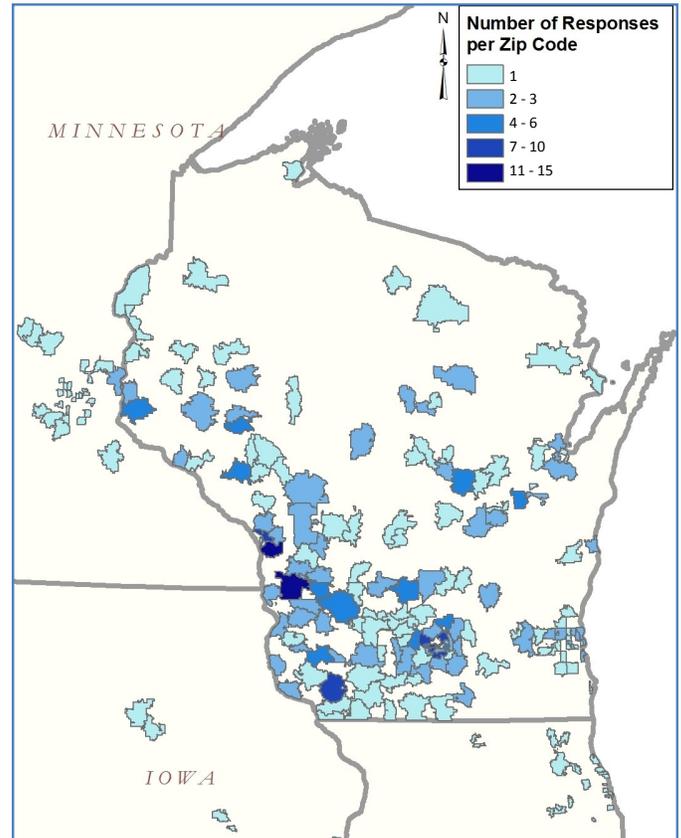
Recreation activities

The recreation activity in which respondents to the on-line survey most commonly participated in the Driftless Area was fishing (85%), which is not surprising, given the nature of the master planning project. Hiking, hunting, and bird watching were also popular activities.

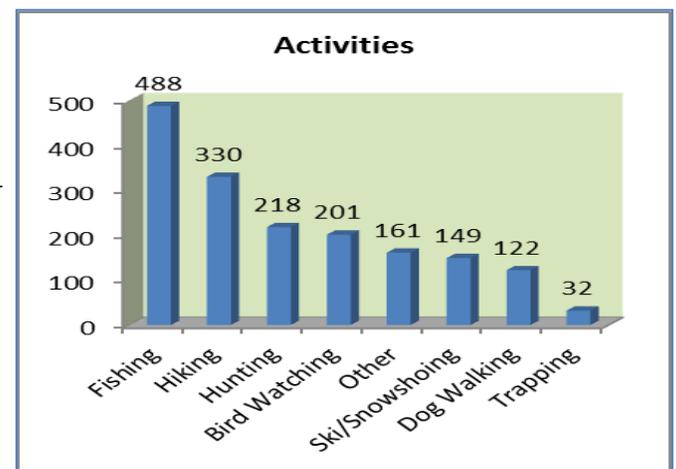
Fish and fishing

Overall satisfaction with fishing in the Driftless Area is very high with 83% satisfied or very satisfied with their angling experiences over the last two years. Less than 4% are dissatisfied. Respondents mostly pursue trout when fishing in the Driftless Area, with about equal interest in brook (86% of respondents) and brown trout (88%). About half this number fish for smallmouth bass (39%) and smaller numbers pursue panfish (31%) and walleye (23%).

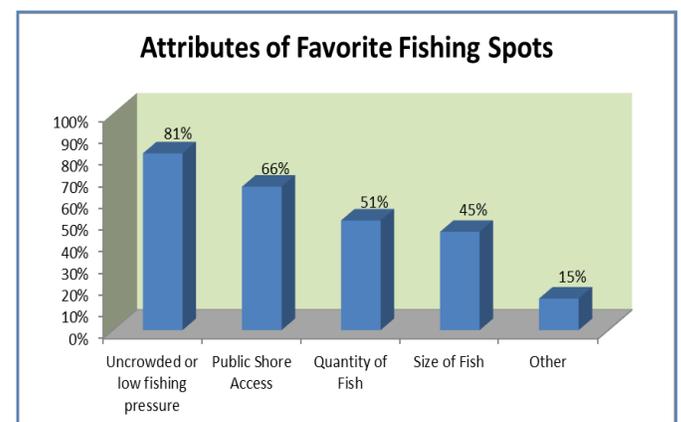
When deciding what streams to fish in the Driftless Area, respondents most often looked for uncrowded streams (81% of respondents) and public shore access (66%). Other important factors in deciding where to fish are places with desirable numbers of fish and size of fish. Other issues noted as important include scenic beauty, presence of brook trout, and relative ease of being able to walk along a stream.



Zip codes of the respondents' primary residence.



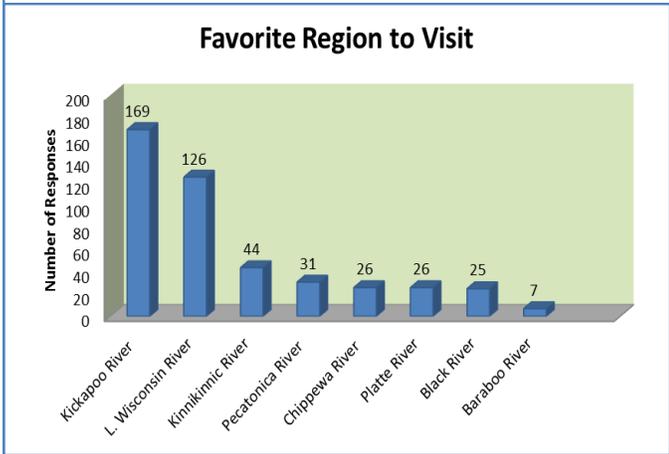
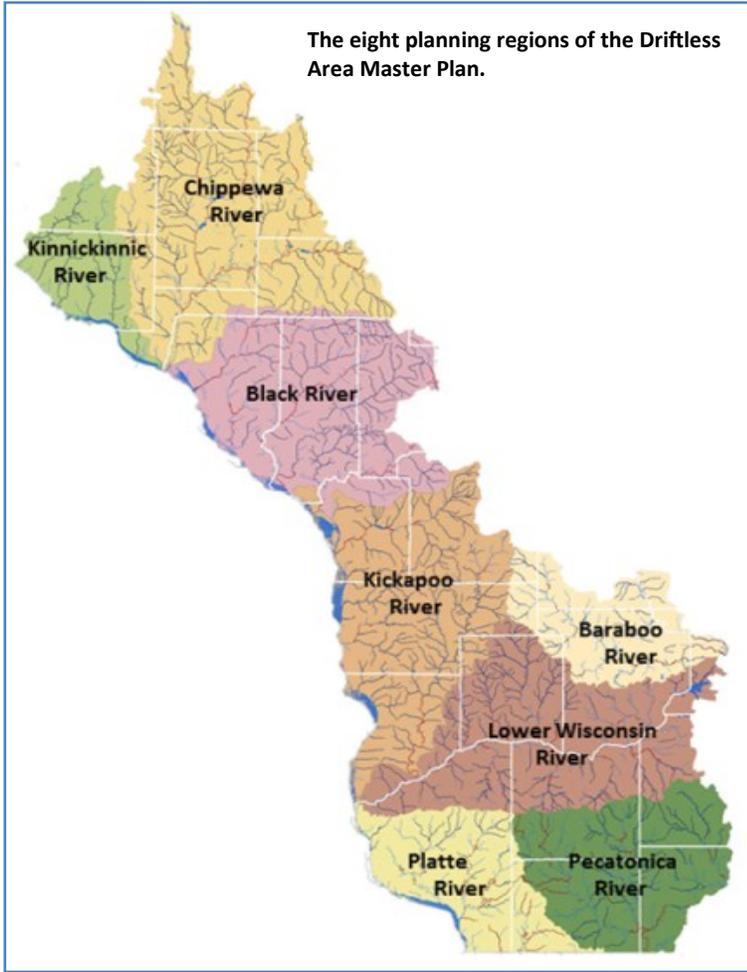
Recreation activities pursued in the Driftless Area.



Most people like uncrowded spots with public access.

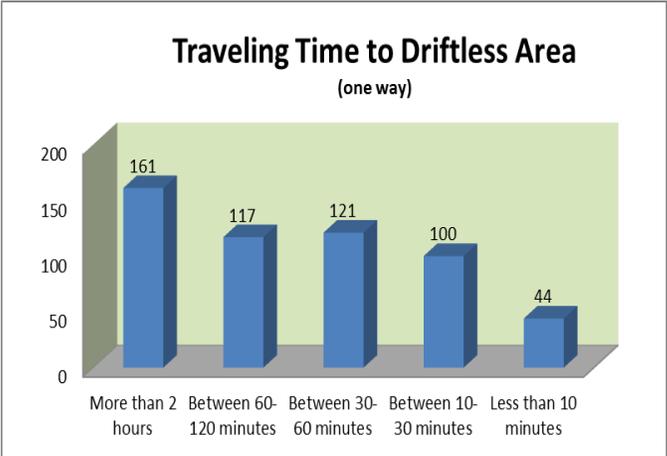
Recreational locations

For planning purposes, the DNR divided the Driftless Area into eight regions. Respondents were asked which regions in the Driftless Area they visited and which was their favorite. The most popular regions were the Kickapoo (321) and the Lower Wisconsin (282). The Platte, Pecatonica, Baraboo, Black and Kinnickinnic River regions were visited by more than 100 respondents. The Chippewa River region was visited least frequently.



Travel time

Half of respondents usually travel more than an hour to participate in outdoor recreation in the Driftless Area. Several factors may influence this. For anglers, although there are a few Driftless Area trout streams within an hour of the Twin Cities and Madison (the source of many anglers in the Driftless Area), these tend to be heavily used. Thus, for many of these anglers seeking uncrowded waters (see above) longer drives are needed. These results are also consistent with the Kickapoo River and Lower Wisconsin River regions being the most popular fishing destinations; for many anglers these areas are more than a one-hour drive. Of course, some Driftless Area anglers live more than a one hour drive from the Driftless Area (e.g., those living in the Milwaukee metropolitan area). Just over one-quarter of respondents usually travel 30 minutes or less when they fish in the Driftless Area.



LAND ACQUISITION ISSUES

To gather input on how the Department should prioritize future land acquisition efforts, respondents were presented with four different scenarios and then asked how they would like to see the DNR allocate its funds.

Land acquisition preferences: focus on fee or easements?

The Department acquires land in “fee title” as well as easements. Most easements that have been acquired along trout and smallmouth bass streams in the Driftless Area are narrow (typically 66’ from the center of the stream) and allow for habitat work in the riparian corridor and public fishing access. As can be seen in the adjacent figure, respondents preferred that the DNR focus most of its acquisition funds and efforts on easements.

Purchasing easements is less expensive than buying land in fee, but lands owned in fee allow more activities, such as hunting and trapping (although hunting can be impractical on some of the narrowest fee parcels). Most easements do not allow hunting or trapping. Interestingly, there is little correlation between the types of recreational activities that respondents participate in and their recommendations for whether the Department should focus more on fee or easement acquisitions. Specifically, respondents that participated in hunting (39%) had a similar preference for the DNR acquiring easements as non-hunters.

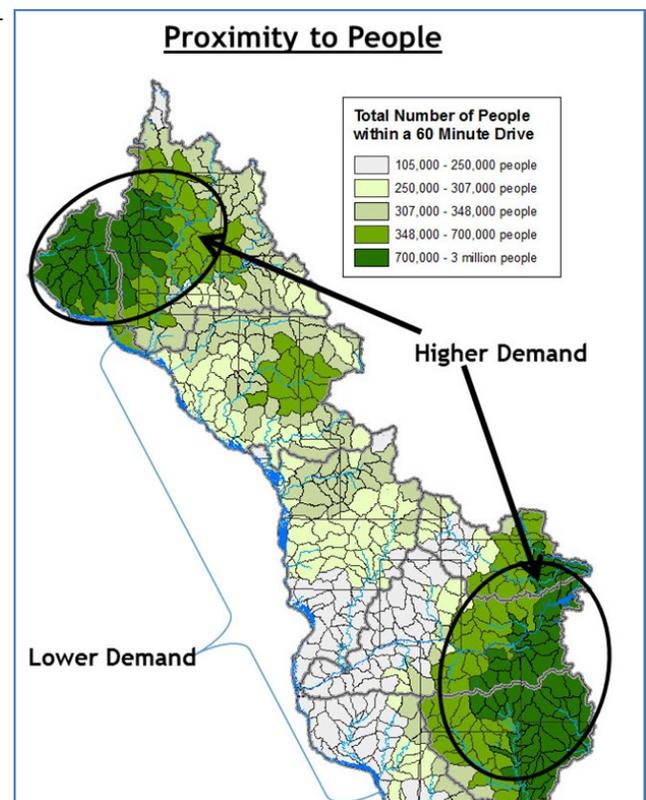
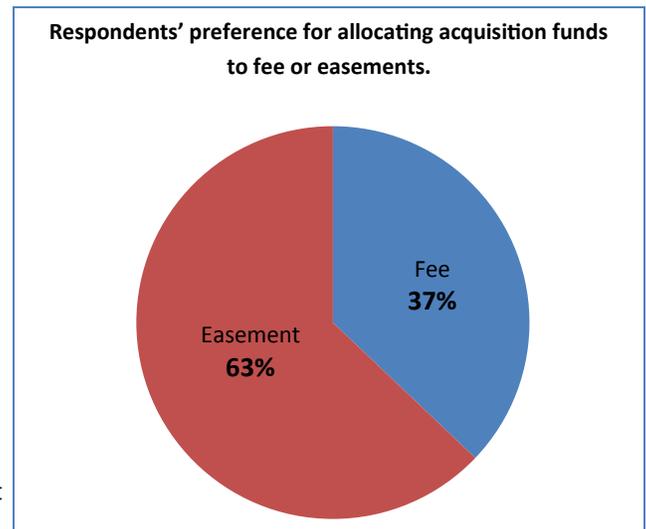
Land acquisition preferences: focus close to urban centers or in distant rural areas?

Angling and recreational demand is not equally distributed across the Driftless Area. The Driftless Area is “bookended” by two large metropolitan areas, the Twin Cities and Madison. Properties near population centers typically cost more than lands in more rural locations, but can provide readily accessible recreation opportunities for many more people.

Respondents were asked their preference as to whether the DNR should focus land purchases in closer proximity to more people or in areas more distant from larger population centers. In general, there was a preference to focus land acquisition efforts in the less populated areas that are under less development pressure. Overall, respondents preferred that the Department spend about 47% of acquisition funds in areas nearer to population centers and about 53% of funds in areas further away from population centers.

This result runs counter to the results of most other public opinion surveys on this issue; most people are interested in governments purchasing more expensive but more easily accessible lands that they can visit after work or for a shorter weekend outing. Wisconsin Administrative Code (NR 1.40) also directs the DNR to place principle emphasis on acquiring lands in heavily populated areas of the state or places that are readily accessible to such areas.

There may be several reasons why respondents to this survey preferred the acquisition of lands further away from where most people live. As mentioned previously, the most popular destinations are the Kickapoo and Lower Wisconsin regions (both of which are distant from population centers) and people may want the DNR to protect more land along streams in these regions. Similarly, as noted from other questions in the survey, many anglers prefer scenic, uncrowded areas with high quality water and lots of fish.



As a result, respondents may be willing to travel longer distances to have these experiences. Finally, people may believe that the better fishing streams are located in more distant areas and want the DNR to focus efforts on the highest quality streams and streams most likely to support trout in the future.

Land acquisition preferences: focus on creating new opportunities or fill in “final gaps”?

By the very nature of real estate, Department acquisitions of land and easements usually occur unevenly over time. Priorities, financial resources, and landowners’ interest in selling properties all change over time. As a result, the DNR is able to acquire some lands and easements in some areas in some years and in other areas at other times. Over long periods, this has led to a range in levels of completeness of acquisition projects. About one-third of the 325 sub-watersheds with trout streams have no public shore access; at the other end of the spectrum, 6.5% of the sub-watersheds with trout streams have over 50% of their stream miles with public shore access. The situation for smallmouth bass anglers is similar—37% of the 211 sub-watersheds with smallmouth bass streams have no public shore access, while 20% have over half their stream miles in public shore access.

Respondents were asked how the DNR should allocate funds related to the level of completeness of public ownership along a stream. At one end of the spectrum would be a trout or smallmouth bass stream that has no existing public shore ownership and purchases would create a new fishing opportunity. At the other end of the spectrum would be a stream where many miles of public access have already been acquired and only a few gaps in public ownership remain. In the middle would be places where some public access exists, but considerably more remains to be acquired.

Respondents were supportive of the DNR acquiring lands and easements across the spectrum of levels of ownerships, with a preference for purchasing lands and easements along streams where no public shore access currently exist. Overall, respondents preferred that the Department spend 45% of funds establishing new angling opportunities, 32% of funds acquiring lands along streams where some acquisition work had already taken place (the “work in the middle” category), and 23% of funds acquiring parcels that “fill in the final gaps.”

Land acquisition preferences: focus on brook trout, brown trout, or smallmouth bass streams?

Respondents were asked how the DNR should allocate funds to purchase land along streams that support different fish: brook trout, brown trout, or smallmouth bass. Almost three-quarters of respondents believe that the DNR should focus on trout waters, with the public evenly split between acquiring lands dominated by brook trout versus those streams dominated by brown trout.

Next Steps

The Department is thankful for all of the time and energy the public invested in attending the meetings and responding to the on-line survey. Understanding the public’s perspectives and priorities is critical for Department planning efforts. Staff will use these insights and perspectives, in combination with data in the Regional & Property Analysis and other information sources, to develop a draft master plan for the properties. The draft master plan is scheduled to be presented to the public in 2014 and will be posted on the project’s website (dnr.wi.gov and then search for “driftless area streams”). On the website, the public can also sign up to receive periodic email updates for the remainder of the planning process.

