

Survey of Residents in the La Moine River Ecosystem Partnership

In the fall of 2003, the La Moine River Ecosystem Partnership sponsored a mail survey of residents in the La Moine River Watershed in western Illinois. A random sample of 717 residents was selected from telephone listings. Selected residents received a four-page questionnaire on approximately September 12 and received a thank-you postcard two weeks later. A second questionnaire was mailed to non-respondents on October 20. Completed questionnaires were received from 287 residents – a satisfactory response to statistically represent the entire watershed population (p<.05).

The purpose of the survey was to identify citizen perceptions of problems in the watershed; identify which land uses that citizens prefer; identify how residents use the natural resources in the area; and to give residents an opportunity for public participation.

The largest response was from citizens residing in Rushville (28) and Carthage (24), while multiple residents in Colchester (18), Mount Sterling (13), and LaHarpe (10) also responded. The majority of respondents represented numerous smaller towns in the watershed. Fifty percent of respondents reside in a city, while 22 percent classified themselves as non-farm rural landowners. Others classified themselves as farm operators (15%) and absentee owners of farmland (4%), and 9 percent did not respond to the question.

Desired land uses

Almost 60 percent of respondents indicated that they would like more wildlife habitat in their local area, while about 30 percent prefers the current amount. Although approximately half of respondents reported that they would like more forests or woodlands and more opportunities for outdoor recreation, overall opinions were split on wanting more or the same amount of forests/woodlands, prairies/grasslands, wetlands, and restored river floodplains. Respondents were generally satisfied with the amount of land in agricultural production.

There were no statistical differences between different landowner types or residents from different towns (p<.05).

Desired Land Uses	Overall Percent Responding			
	Less	Same	More	Don't Know
Forests or woodlands	5	40	45	10
Prairies or grasslands	4	48	37	11
Wetlands	14	43	26	17
River floodplains	8	43	30	19
Outdoor recreation	5	38	49	8
Wildlife habitat	5	28	58	9
Land in agriculture	17	57	16	10

Watershed issues

Opinions were generally split about the types and severity of natural resource or environmental problems in the watershed. Although the mean scores indicate problems of

only moderate or slight severity, the percentage of people responding to each category suggests that opinions vary about the identification and severity of problems. This response pattern suggests the need for more public education about these issues.

There were no statistical differences between different landowner types or residents from different towns (p<.05).

Watershed Issues	Percent Responding			
	Not a Problem	Slight/Moderate Problem	Serious Problem	Don't Know
Quality of water for fishing / swimming	10	56	26	8
Quality of water for drinking	10	41	42	7
Quality of groundwater	9	44	38	9
Rivers and streams with eroding banks	9	55	20	16
Loss of topsoil	5	54	23	18
Soil deposits in Streams	4	49	34	13
Loss of wildlife habitat	17	41	32	10
Exotic or non-native plants	17	38	19	26
Loss of natural areas	15	48	29	8
Degradation of existing natural areas	11	58	18	13
Property damage from wildlife	23	53	13	11
Seepage from septic tanks	20	48	8	24
Solid waste disposal	15	45	21	19
Pollution from factories	27	41	18	14
Visual attractiveness	26	55	12	7
Economic growth	8	34	49	9

Who is causing the problems?

Respondents were asked to identify the impact that factories, local businesses, homeowners, family farmers, and corporate farmers are having on the natural environment in their community. Residents appear to believe that all are contributing about equally.

Use of natural resources

Survey respondents indicated that outdoor recreation is important in their part of the state. About 74 percent of

respondents reported that they visit a park more than once a year, and 87 percent observe wildlife. Approximately half of respondents participate in hiking, biking, fishing, and boating. About 40 percent enjoy camping, and 30 percent participate in hunting.

Type of Recreation	Percent Responding / Times Per Year				
	Once	2-4	5-12	+12	Never
Visit Parks	11	33	25	16	15
Observe Wildlife	4	21	19	43	13
Hiking	9	16	11	13	51
Biking	6	12	8	9	65
Hunting	2	7	9	16	66
Fishing	4	14	10	21	51
Boating	9	11	9	9	62
Camping	8	14	9	6	63
Snow-Mobiling	2	1	0	1	96
Cross-Country Skiing	1	1	0	0	98
Off-Road Vehicles	2	7	4	10	77

Satisfaction with outdoor recreation

Respondents were also asked to rate their satisfaction level with various outdoor recreation factors. Overall, respondents were generally satisfied, but respondents voiced concern about public boat access to the La Moine River, the types of activities offered, and the condition of park structures.

Outdoor Recreation Factors	Percent Responding			
	Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not Satisfied	Don't Know
Distance Traveled to Parks and Natural Areas	54	28	9	9
Number of Parks and Natural Areas	43	32	16	9
Types of Activities at Parks and Natural Areas	33	29	19	19
Public Boat & Canoe Access to the Vermilion River	14	15	24	47
Quality of Restrooms, Parking Lots, Tables, Benches at Parks/Natural Areas	30	32	21	17
Variety and Quality of Wildlife at Parks/Natural Areas	35	35	12	18
Variety/Quality of Vegetation and Trees at Parks/Natural Areas	47	32	8	13

Other comments

Survey respondents were given space to include additional comments about topics covered in the study or about other issues related to their watershed. Sixteen percent of respondents took the opportunity to provide detailed comments.

Most comments related to the quality of the La Moine River. Comments ranged from concerns about chemicals such as radium and herbicides in the stream to erosion and siltation. Some commented on eroding river banks, and others commented about the decline in desirable fish species. There were several comments expressing dissatisfaction with the lack of development and management of the La Moine River for recreation. Some commented on the potential for increasing tourism related to camping, fishing, hunting, and boating.

There were also many comments pertaining to the management of Argyle State Park. These comments related to dissatisfaction that the park was not fully opened during the past summer and concern expressed about mismanagement and lack of care.

Summary/Conclusion

The desire for more wildlife habitat and the high percentage that enjoy observing wildlife suggest that residents would like to see more wildlife in the watershed. However, the response was split between wanting the same amount or more of various habitat types. So although residents would like to see more wildlife and wildlife habitat, they do not necessarily want more trees, wetlands, grasslands or restored river floodplains. This response indicates a need for further clarification and education on these issues.

The mean survey response does not indicate the perception of any severe natural resource or environmental problems in the watershed. However, these results need to be considered carefully. Responses were often split between various response categories, and about 25 percent of respondents do perceive serious problems. These response patterns suggest that respondents may not have possessed the knowledge or experience to accurately answer these questions. When responses are split, it also indicates an opinion by only a weak majority. In these cases, there are often about 20-25 percent of residents with opposing views. Without a strong majority, a significant number of residents may eventually be dissatisfied with any action or lack of action taken by the Partnership.

These issues illustrate the strong need for public education about natural resource and environmental issues in the watershed. In particular, the response indicates the need for information about the actual severity of erosion, water quality and habitat loss in the watershed. Education is also needed about the benefits of forests, grasslands, wetlands and restored floodplains.

The positive responses to the outdoor recreation questions also suggest that residents highly value natural areas in their watershed, and efforts should be taken to maintain or improve these areas and recreational opportunities.

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