Northern Idaho Citizens Survey on Nongame Wildlife and Idaho Income Tax Checkoff Program

Abstract

A mail survey was conducted of 300 randomly selected residents of northern Idaho to obtain their attitudes toward nongame animals and the Idaho Income Tax Checkoff Program. Birds were most interesting to residents compared to mammals, fish, and reptiles. Most people were unaware of the majority of current nongame projects funded by the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. In addition, the public does not appear well informed about nongame wildlife or about the support required to help sustain their populations. Only 50% of respondents knew about the tax checkoff program. Approximately two-thirds of the respondents that used tax consultants were not informed by the consultants of the tax checkoff program. To increase donations to nongame through the tax checkoff program the following recommendations are made: 1) a more effective publicity campaign to inform the public of the value of nongame is needed, 2) contributors should know how their donations will be used, 3) a large percentage of nongame projects should appeal to the public's interest, and 4) increased cooperation from tax consultants is necessary.

Introduction

Funding nongame projects has been a continual problem for state wildlife agencies. A variety of approaches have been tried including voluntary contributions, sale of decals and stamps, general appropriations, state sales tax, personalized license plates and income tax checkoffs. Income tax checkoffs have become the most significant source of revenue. Since 1978, thirty-one states have initiated checkoff programs whereby taxpayers can contribute a portion of their tax refund to nongame programs. In 1984, taxpayers across the country donated 89 million to nongame (McCance 1985).

While apparently a successful source of funds, the tax checkoff program may not be a stable long-term revenue source. Harpman and Reuler (1985) demonstrated a declining trend in revenue generated in most states using the tax checkoff approach. As other competing checkoffs, such as Child Abuse and Olympics, are added to a state's tax form, decreased contributions to nongame are likely to follow (Applegate and Trout 1984).

Idaho's nongame program began in the 1981 tax year with contributions of $106,000 through the income tax checkoff. Keller (1984) indicated that approximately 6% of Idaho taxpayers contributed $106,200 for the 1982 tax year. Since then, contributions have declined yearly until in 1984 only $80,000 was received. Checkoffs for Child Abuse and Drug Enforcement are presently competing with nongame for voluntary contributions from taxpayers.

To maximize revenue derived from the income Tax Checkoff Program, general information is needed about the public's attitude and behavior toward the tax checkoff program and nongame wildlife. Our objectives were to determine the public's level of awareness concerning the Idaho Department of Fish and Game Nongame Program, to determine characteristics of contributors to the nongame fund and to determine public attitudes toward nongame and the tax checkoff program. To obtain this information we conducted a survey of the residents in northern Idaho.

Methods

A random sample of 300 of a population of 95,000 names was surveyed by mail in the spring of 1985 using the procedures outlined in Dillman (1981). The area covered was from Lewiston north to the Canadian border. The survey contained 33 questions concerning the citizens' knowledge of nongame animals, current nongame projects...
and the income tax checkoff program. The survey, with an introductory letter, was mailed on 22 March 1985 with a self-addressed, stamped envelope enclosed. After 2 weeks, a postcard was sent in an attempt to encourage participation. After 2 more weeks another survey was mailed as a reminder to participants misplacing or losing their surveys and to further encourage participation.

Results

One hundred seventy-four (58%) surveys were returned. All major areas were represented. The first mailing yielded 135 returns, the follow-up mailing resulted in a return of 39 surveys which indicated a follow-up was important. Age ranged from 21 to 85 years old. Education ranged from 1 to 22 years.

Fifty-three percent of respondents knew that the Idaho Department of Fish and Game is currently involved in at least one nongame project (Table 1). Familiarity was the highest among the more educated and those in age group 20-29, 30-39 and 60-69 years.

Contributors to the Tax Checkoff Program

Respondents contributing to the 1981, 1982, and 1983 Nongame Income Tax Checkoff Program comprised 6%, 11%, and 12%, respectively. Although Keller (1984) indicated that 6% of Idaho taxpayers donated in 1982, our data cannot be discounted because information on donations of southern Idaho taxpayers is unknown. Of the total respondents asked about the 1984 Income Tax Checkoff Program, 23% indicated they intended to or had contributed. Verification of contributions cannot be made, therefore the validity of these results is unknown.

Age was a factor among contributors with more donations coming from those in age groups 30-39 and 40-49 years. Sixty percent of all donations were from these age groups compared to 21% from the 50-59 and 60-69 age groups and 18% from the 20-29 age group. Education was also related to participation in the Tax Checkoff Program. Twice as many participants with at least some college (58%) compared to high school graduates (30%) and over 5 times more than those with less than 12 years education (11%) said they had or intended to participate in the 1984 program.

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<tr>
<th>Project</th>
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<tr>
<td>Raptor nesting platforms</td>
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<td>39</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woodland caribou research</td>
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<td>Bluebird nest boxes</td>
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<td>Peregrine falcon reintroduction</td>
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<td>Nongame video programming on PBS</td>
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<td>40</td>
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<td>Fish hatchery/waterbird literature search and assessment in Idaho</td>
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<td>Tree removal</td>
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<td>Landscaping for wildlife</td>
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<td>Ecological study of colonial nesting</td>
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<td>waterbirds in eastern Idaho</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Nongame wildlife data collection</td>
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<td>Boreal owl research</td>
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<td>Educational resource center for Project WILD</td>
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<td>Urban wildlife</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Idaho ground squirrel</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>Nongame species ecological leaflets</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Translocation of Shoshone sculpin</td>
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Of the 165 respondents that either hunt or fish, 22% said they had or intended to contribute to the 1984 program. Urbanites and rural dwellers were equally likely (23%) to have contributed or intended to contribute to the 1984 program.

The U.S. Olympic Fund and the Drug Enforcement Fund appeared to have little impact on the amount contributed to the Nongame Tax Checkoff Fund. Of respondents contributing to the 1983 Nongame Program, 90% said they would not have given more if the U.S. Olympic or the Drug Enforcement Funds were not on the list. Only 7% contributed to the above two funds. Eighty-two percent would not be inclined to donate more if they were somehow recognized for their donation. However, twenty-four percent said they would be more inclined to donate to the program if they were given an opportunity to suggest a specific nongame management project for possible funding.

Budget Expenditures

A series of questions were asked regarding expenditure of monies for various nongame subjects. Birds and endangered species were most popular with respondents (Table 2).

Respondents who had knowledge of the Idaho Nongame Income Tax Checkoff Program (50%)
were asked to identify the origin of their information (Table 3). Of those naming a source for their knowledge of the program, 34% said they had or intended to contribute to the 1984 program.

Of the 92 respondents that had professional tax consultants prepare their taxes, 67% were not informed by their consultant of the Idaho Nongame Tax Checkoff Program. Those that were informed of the program (30%) stated they were not given any advice about contributing. A few (2%) were advised not to contribute. Of the 40 respondents that reported preparing their own taxes, 22% contributed or intended to contribute.

Other Pertinent Information

Participants were asked to indicate the types of outdoor and nature activities in which they participate. Eighty percent fish, 76% camp, 62% picnic, 58% view wildlife, 58% hunt, 53% hike, 32% photograph nature, 18% birdwatch, 14% engage in nature study, and 3% trap. They were also asked if they had a particular animal that they think should be considered for a nongame project. Nineteen respondents named six game animals: pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*, black bear *Ursus americanus*, cougar *Felis concolor*, elk *Cervus elaphus*, rabbit *Sylvilagus nuttallii* and northern pike *Esox lucius*; seven nongame: caribou *Rangifer tarandus*, mountain bluebird *Sialia currucoides*, red squirrel *Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*, Peregrine falcon *Falco peregrinus*, barred owl *Strix varia*, bald eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, and wolf *Canis lupus* and two fur bearers. Obviously the public does not readily distinguish game from nongame species.

Sixty-one percent believed that their donations to the Nongame Program would aid mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians that would be otherwise ignored. Fifty-three percent believed it would result in improved habitat conditions for nongame species. Fifty percent assumed that donating would lead to a higher quality environment in Idaho, while only 9% felt that donating would have no effect on nongame wildlife. Nearly 30% believed donating would lead to more recreational opportunities to view nongame wildlife. The monetary aspect of donating apparently is of little concern, for only 15% stated that donating would leave them with less money to buy things more important to them.

Last of all, 33% believed that donating would lead to more bureaucracy. Of the more educated respondents, 1 out of every 4 believed this to be true. The different age groups varied in their response, with the 30-39 age group lowest with 14% believing more bureaucracy would be created while the highest was the 60-69 age group with 32% believing this would occur. However, we do not know if these individuals did not contribute because of this belief.

Participants were given an opportunity to offer their ideas on how to increase revenue for nongame. Some interesting and creative ideas were rendered by 50 (32%) participants. Some general recommendations were: raffles, lotteries, adopt an animal project by school children, walkathons, a general tax for wildlife, assistance from private organizations, fines for people
damaging wildlife habitat, and donation of recyclables. An Idaho recreation fee was recommended similar to the one used in Montana. Those individuals such as campers, hikers, motorcyclists, and fourwheelers would pay an established fee for use of state and federal land. Increasing fees for hunting and fishing licenses and using a portion of this revenue for nongame was recommended by 24% of those submitting ideas.

The most frequently recommended idea (40%) was to obtain the public's interest by educating them to the benefits of nongame animals. As one participant stated, “Let the public get involved in the planning of nongame projects within their community. Use public television to spread the word. Show the public that donated money is not being wasted. Better education of the people should lead to better understanding which will hopefully lead to greater contributions.”

Discussion

Northern Idahoans are avid outdoors-people. Nongame wildlife is a part of their outdoors and a concern for it is clearly shown in this study. However, concern does not alleviate the perplexity of supporting nongame wildlife. In 1982, Idaho had only 6% of the taxpayers contributing to support nongame wildlife (Keller 1984). While this was slightly above the national average in percent donating, the average dollar amount contributed ($4.43) was below average (Keller 1984). Therefore, the important challenges are getting a greater percentage of the taxpayers to participate and increasing the amount donated from contributors.

Public education regarding the importance of nongame wildlife is integral. Achieving such awareness will involve a considerable financial investment. But with greater public awareness it should be easier to convince people to support nongame wildlife. In addition, the public must be informed of current projects involving nongame. Although half of the respondents knew the Idaho Department of Fish and Game was involved in various nongame projects, the highest report of knowledge of a nongame project was 29% (establishment of nesting platforms for raptors). Only 3% had knowledge of the translocation of Shoshone sculpin Cottus greenei, a rare fish, and nongame species ecological leaflets. Un-

familiarity about the sculpin project might be expected because of the regional nature of this survey, but nongame leaflets have been published in the Idaho Wildlife magazine and are available at all regional offices.

Nongame projects should be geared to the public's interest. However, species less attractive to the public should not be neglected. A program with a number of projects established from public input could be implemented. One of the most favored projects was nongame video programming on the Idaho Education/Public Broadcasting System. This could be a message saying the public is eager to learn about nongame wildlife.

Contrary to Applegate's (1984) New Jersey survey, television was the second most effective way of reaching the public. This could be associated with the remoteness of northern Idaho. The Tax Checkoff Program is seasonal, so money spent on television ads should be concentrated just prior to and during income tax time in an effort to keep expenditures to a minimum. In a further study, Applegate and Trout (1984) concluded that promotional efforts on both radio and television appear to increase checkoff revenue. Radio appears to be the most effective followed closely by television. As stated in their report, “the regression model suggests that promotional dollars invested in radio are returned twenty-fold in checkoff revenue.” Although radio appeared insignificant in this survey, it still might be an effective means of public information when considering the entire state. Additional special interest programs are likely to be added to the tax form, increasing competition for checkoff dollars as has occurred in other states (Applegate and Trout 1984). While our results did not support this, we believe it likely to occur in the future. The loss in revenue could be significant, so an increased publicity effort will probably be needed to at least maintain current revenue level.

Idaho does not specify the final destination of its tax checkoff dollars within the Nongame Fund. This could be detrimental to potential revenue according to Applegate and Trout (1984). A substantial increase in revenue was obtained by those states that specified where the donation was destined compared to those with a general purpose (Applegate and Trout 1984). Although this is a tentative conclusion, it appears that an increase in participants can be obtained if they know what their contribution will support. This
could be a way of satisfying the 33% of northern Idaho residents that their donation will not contribute to more bureaucracy and induce them to participate in the Tax Checkoff Program.

A means to enhance donations from citizens using tax consultants needs to be developed. A majority of the respondents used a consultant to prepare their 1984 income taxes. Most of these were not informed of the Income Tax Checkoff Program. New Jersey has experienced a similar problem (Applegate 1984). There could be a substantial increase in revenue if tax consultants would inform clients of the Tax Checkoff Program.

The Income Tax Checkoff Program has been a key source of financial support to current nongame wildlife projects. However, its dependability is questioned. The success of the program has enticed a flooding of tax forms with other checkoffs. As each additional checkoff is added to the tax form, a larger decrease in revenue is likely to follow. Harpman and Reuler (1985) demonstrated a downward trend in revenue by most states using the Income Tax Checkoff Programs, indicating that this funding avenue does not appear to have long-term stability. If the addition of other checkoffs remains unrestrained, a significant decrease in contributions may occur.

In 1982 almost the entire amount of contributions in Idaho was received from those individuals making $60,000 or less (Harpman and Reuler 1985). Fifty percent of the contributions were donated by people with an income of $30,000 or less. Donations did increase with income, but not proportionally. From this analysis, Harpman and Reuler concluded that the checkoff is regressive and lower income taxpayers pay more than their “fair share” of the cost of supporting nongame.

Recommendations

1. To gain voluntary contributions from taxpayers an effective publicity campaign must be waged. Competition for the dollar is increasing by the addition of more checkoff programs to the tax form. The public must be convinced that the state’s wildlife is an important ecological component that relies on contributions from the state’s citizens. Henderson (1984) described an elaborate and effective publicity campaign implemented by the state of Minnesota.

2. Specific designation of checkoff dollars is recommended. We should eliminate the doubt as to where contributions are being funneled.

3. Species and projects of public interest should be obtained so projects can be programmed to these interests, giving the public a feeling of participation.

4. Finally, an effort to gain support from tax consultants has to be implemented. It is apparent that tax preparers in northern Idaho are not informing their clients of the Income Tax Checkoff Program which eliminates a large number of potential contributors.

The ability of the Income Tax Checkoff Program as a reliable source of income is in doubt. Current studies show a decline in income from a majority of the states using checkoff programs. Although the checkoff cannot be considered an ideal fund raising mechanism (Harpman and Reuler 1985), it must not be abandoned until a more equitable and reliable system can be found.

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Literature Cited


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