

RIVER ISSUES

In late May, North Dakota Game and Fish Department officials held a public meeting to address a variety of concerns related to increasing recreational use of the Missouri River in the Bismarck-Mandan area. It was a successful initial attempt to involve the many people who use and live along the river in a long-term process designed to increase awareness and understanding of river issues.

The Missouri River is a statewide resource. It attracts shoreline and water recreation up and down its more than 250 miles in North Dakota. Nowhere is that recreation as concentrated as in the Bismarck-Mandan area during spring and summer.

Anglers come from all over the state to fish the Missouri for walleyes in the weeks after ice-out. As weather continues to warm, local residents uncover pleasure boats, pontoons and personal watercraft in anticipation of hot summer evenings and weekends.

The Missouri is a big river as it runs through North Dakota. Of course, much of its function and appearance changed after construction of Garrison and Oahe dams in the 1950s and '60s. In the Bismarck-Mandan area, the river became much more stable because of programmed releases from Garrison Dam. The water cleared because much of the silt that helped establish the nickname "The Big Muddy," now settles to the bottom of Lake Sakakawea.

Because of the new river/reservoir structure, a respectable walleye fishery slowly developed downstream from Garrison Dam. In the Bismarck-Mandan

area, fishing pressure gradually increased. Recreational boating existed, but the number of purely pleasure boaters has increased markedly in just the last few years.

Many factors have come together to generate this increased boating traffic, including the following:

1. Popularity of personal watercraft.
2. Development of housing and marinas along the river that allow easier and more convenient access to the water.
3. Reduced water levels on both Sakakawea and Oahe, but particularly Oahe, that serve to concentrate activity in the Bismarck-Mandan area.

The Game and Fish Department is the agency responsible for licensing boats in North Dakota. Statewide, that number has increased from about 42,000 in 1997, to more than 50,000 in 2007. About 10,000 of those registered boats belong to people who live in Burleigh or Morton counties.

Certainly, not all use their boats in the stretch of Missouri River five miles north and south of Interstate 94. Of the people who do use their boats on the Missouri, either occasionally or exclusively, they aren't all on the river at the same time, although on a hot mid-July Saturday afternoon, it might seem that way.

It does get crowded, but that doesn't necessarily lead to more accidents. Between 1997 and 2006, North Dakota had 160 reported boating accidents. The Missouri River between Burleigh and Morton counties accounted for 21 of those, or 13 percent. Those 21 reported accidents included 15 injuries.

While accident statistics are about in line with the number of boats in the two counties, boating violation statistics are a bit different. In the last three years, the number of boating violations cited on the river in

Burleigh and Morton counties has tripled.

The number of citations issued averaged about 13 from 1999 through 2003. From 2004 through 2006, the average is 38 citations. These violations include boating under the influence, or BUIs.

Other alcohol violations, such as minor in possession, averaged less than 10 from 1997 through 2003. For the last three years the average is right around 40 per year.

North Dakota has other places where boating activity is intense. Lake Metigoshe in Bottineau County is perhaps the closest rival to the Bismarck-Mandan Missouri. The difference, perhaps, is that Metigoshe, except for the state park area, is ringed with cabins and homes and has always been a summer recreation hotspot.

New marinas along the Missouri River in the Bismarck-Mandan area are popular because they are convenient places for people to dock their boats for the summer, rather than having to unload and load at boat ramps each trip to the water.



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The Missouri River is a little different. For quite some time, anglers had the river to themselves. Boat ramps were sometimes crowded on evenings and weekends, but out on the river, space was available.

Then came more recreational or nonfishing boaters who launched their crafts and sought out sandbars for relaxing social gatherings.

And then came the first of several off-river marinas, where shoreline homeowners could store their boats on lifts in protected waters, and city residents could rent a slip to store their boat or pontoon for the summer, instead of having to drag their craft to a public ramp every time they wanted to hit the river.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issues permits for docks both in the main river channel and in developments that are connected to the river. In 1997, in the Bismarck-Mandan area, the Corps permitted 64 docks in the river, and 231 in developments for a total of 295. In 2006, the same area had 110 permitted docks in the river and an additional 515 in developments for a total of 625.

Throughout all this expansion of river use, the Game and Fish Department has had one full-time warden for all of Morton County, and one for all of Burleigh County. In addition, a part-time officer works solely on the river during spring and summer months, and Game and Fish provides grants to county sheriff departments to fund extra river enforcement. On many weekends, wardens come in from other parts of the state to help with river patrol.

And yet, many violations go undetected. Just as every reckless driver on the interstate isn't caught, game wardens aren't at the scene for every careless boating operation. Over the last few years, public feedback and concern has increased, to the point where some groups are calling for new regulations to protect their specific interests.

This isn't unexpected. The chronology of what is occurring on the Missouri River has been played out many times before all over the country. It starts with a public resource and a small user group that for some time had almost exclusive use of the resource. Then another user group "discovers" the resource and traffic increases. The first users don't appreciate the "Johnny-come-latelies," and neither of those groups appreciate promotions designed to get even more people to come and use the resource.

Sides develop. In this case, it's more than two sides. Its anglers and boaters and homeowners and developers, with the Game and Fish Department in the middle, trying to serve the public, and protect the public's resources.

After all, the Missouri River is a public resource. It's not just for adjacent homeowners or anglers or pontooners or jet-skiers or business ventures. It's not just for Bismarck or Mandan residents.

Starting a dialogue to bring many sides together may not solve all the concerns immediately, but it may help people who appreciate the river in one way or another to adjust their expectations.

At the very least, the lines of communication are open, and the Game and Fish Department will continue to not only provide more information, but also encourage more public input on river issues.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.

Missouri River boat ramps are usually busy on summer evenings and weekends.



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