

Anglers, Tourists Seek MISSISSIPPI'S "ARC"



24

Kenneth Billings

By Karen Brasher

Mississippi's "Arc of Slabs" is a prime destination for families or individuals seeking a day of good fishing or a whole vacation on the water.

The Arc of Slabs, a term recently coined by *In-Fisherman* magazine, refers to the four U.S. Army Corps of Engineers flood-control reservoirs along the Interstate 55 corridor in north Mississippi. These water impoundments are Arkabutla, Sardis, Enid and Grenada lakes. These reservoirs are known for their quality white and black crappie populations and the fishing opportunities they produce.

"Large crappie are often affectionately referred to as 'slabs' by anglers seeking this culinary treat, and the 'arc' describes the geographic characteristics the four lakes make along the I-55 corridor, which looks like a quarter moon," said Kevin Hunt, associate professor of wildlife and fisheries at MSU. Hunt also serves as director of the Human Dimensions and Conservation Law Enforcement Laboratory.

Many Southerners consider crappie the best fish for eating, and catches often come in bunches that allow anglers to share their bounty with family and friends.

These lakes provide numerous fishing opportunities for anglers in Mississippi and surrounding states. These and other lakes have some referring to Mississippi as a top crappie fishing destination, Hunt added. Many of the crappie fishing tournament trails host prestigious events at the north Mississippi reservoirs, which helps increase overall tourism to the region.

Despite the many visitors to these fishing destinations, little is known about the attitudes of anglers using the impoundments and the impacts of their spending on the economies of the surrounding counties.

Researchers in the Forest and Wildlife Research Center initiated a study to assess the economic impacts of fishing at Sardis and Grenada lakes—the two most used reservoirs. Funded by MSU, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration, and the Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks, the study included interviews of recreational boat anglers at the lakes and a follow-up mail survey.

"Fishing is an important activity in Mississippi, contributing \$240 million to the state's economy," Hunt said. According to a report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, more than 546,000 residents and nonresidents enjoy fishing opportunities throughout the state.

To understand more about the premier destinations, wildlife and fisheries graduate student Susan Baker, along with undergraduate students under her direction, conducted exit interviews from March 2006 to February 2007 at Sardis Lake and from March 2007 to February 2008 at Grenada Lake.

"The exit interviews were conducted at randomly selected boat ramps on 110 days at each of the reservoirs and were followed by a mail survey sent to anglers shortly after their trips," Hunt said.

At Sardis Lake, some 500 fishing parties agreed to be part of the study when they were approached at boat ramps after their fishing trips.

"Of those surveyed at Sardis, 60 percent were from Mississippi and 40 percent were from out of state, mostly from the Memphis area," Hunt said.

A total of 605 fishing parties took part in the study at Grenada Lake. Of those, 85 percent were from Mississippi. Residents of Missouri were the largest nonresident angler group at slightly more than 5 percent.

The Grenada study is not yet complete, but results from the Sardis survey indicate that the Arc of Slabs is indeed a stream of revenue for Mississippi's economy.

"On the state level for the 2006-2007 fishing season, the total sales impact was \$16.7 million in 2007, supporting 297 full- and part-time jobs," said Steve Grado, an MSU economist and forestry professor. "The analysis indicated that for every dollar spent in the state on fishing-related expenditures at Sardis Lake, there was an economic impact return of \$1.59."

The Mississippi counties of Panola, Marshall, and Lafayette had a total impact of \$7.1 million in 2007, supporting 119 full- and part-time jobs in the local area, Grado added.

Other results from the survey indicated:

- 96 percent of anglers were male with an average age of 53.
- Median household income was \$60,000 to \$70,000.
- Anglers spent an average of 45 days fishing in lakes.
- On average, anglers had 40 years of freshwater fishing experience.

"The Sardis Lake survey will help government agencies understand who their clients are, how to serve them better and where they can market the fishing opportunities to attract more anglers," Hunt said.

It also places an economic value on the activity, which can be used to assist in decision making for future management and planning. For example, 79 percent of the fishermen indicated a preference for catching crappie.

"This will motivate fisheries biologists and justify management strategies that will target the habitat needs of both species of crappie at every life stage," said Steve Miranda, an MSU wildlife and fisheries professor.

Additionally, the majority of anglers enjoyed their trips and believed the facilities met their needs. This is good news for these aging reservoirs, which have been around for about 50 years.

Recent regulatory changes, including 12-inch minimum size limits, 20-fish daily bag limits and pole restrictions, mean Mississippi has some of the most protective crappie regulations in the nation. Hunt said these regulations are designed to maintain the quality of the fisheries and make sure the Arc of Slabs continues to provide a consistent stream of economic benefits, as well as to maintain its status as a crappie fishing destination.