

Owyhee River Boater Study

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River(s): Owyhee
Research Topic(s): Boater characteristics, Crowding, Perception of river flow, Recreational experience, Trip characteristics, Motivations, Level of environmental impacts, Outfitter/guides, User group conflicts
Type of Publication: Report

1. Study Purpose

To describe “visitor characteristics (including demographics, past river experience, and motives for boating the Owyhee River), perception of impacts along the river (including social and ecological conditions), perception and evaluation of livestock impacts, evaluation of management controls” (p. xiii), and evaluate whether Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) are being protected.

2. Findings

Response rate 80% for BLM survey and 76% for University of Idaho surveys.

2.1. Boater Characteristics and Trip Characteristics

2.1.1. Demographics

- Mean age = 42; rafters slightly older than kayakers (45 vs. 34)
- Most respondents were male
- Women comprised about half the beginner boaters
- Highly educated (27% with advanced degree, 70% with bachelors)
- 59% had income > \$50,000, 30% of commercial passengers had income > \$100,000

2.1.2. Past experience on the Owyhee River

- 61% had never floated the Owyhee and 14% had only been there once before; those who had been there more than 5 times were generally from nearby Boise area
- 24% of experienced boaters (> 5 trips) were commercial guides
- 51% of rafters were first time Owyhee boaters, but 70% of other craft users were new to the Owyhee
- Commercial passengers were least experienced boating the Owyhee – 92% had never been on the river
- 75% of commercial guides were pretty new to the Owyhee

2.1.3. General boating experience

- Only 12% were first time boaters, 24% boated 2 to 5 years, 27% had been boating for 6 to 10 years, and 37% had been boating for over 10 years
- Skill level coincided with boating experience
- 21% of non-rafters were in their first year of boating, while only 8% of rafters were
- Commercial guides have similar experience level to private boaters, but fewer years of boating
- Most boaters have taken an overnight float trip prior to boating the Owyhee
- Those boating from Three Forks were comfortable with a higher class of rapids than those floating from Rome

2.1.4. Trip characteristics

- Nearly half of all boaters reported optimum flows between 1,900 and 3,500 cfs, however results indicated “no clear consensus about optimum flows” (p. 31)
- 44% feel the flow is “ideal”
- About 33% of participants were in groups larger than 10, about 25% had a group size < 5
- 3 to 4 nights per trip on the lower section of the Owyhee, the middle segment was a bit shorter in trip duration

2.2. Motivations

- Most important reason for boating the Owyhee was the wilderness character of the river - “remote/pristine setting (96%), scenery (92%), geology (89%), and solitude (84%)” (p. xvi)
- The lack of permit requirement at this river was important to more than 70% of experience boaters
- The early flow season played a slight role in deciding to boat the Owyhee
- Challenging rapids were important reasons for commercial passengers (46%)

2.3. Social Conditions

- Boating encounters at the put-in, on the river, and camped within sight of was about what was expected for about half of the respondents; 1/3 saw more people than expected
- Experienced boaters seemed the most realistic in their expectations of encounters
- Actual conditions were generally better than expectations in terms of encounters
- Most felt the number of encounters was “about right” (p. xvii); 29% felt there were too many groups observed

- The lower section was more often reported as having too many groups than the middle section
- Most boaters “did not notice” (p. xvii) others camped within sight or sound of their camp
- Commercial boaters (44%) felt their desired campsite occupied by another group was an issue

2.4. Conflicts

- 41% of respondents reported having a negative experience when observing other groups racing for sites or crowding at sites
- Most respondents did not notice any conflict situations

2.5. Other Impacts Noticed

- Aircraft flying over the river were the most commonly noticed (67%), followed by weeds (59%), and damage to prehistoric sites (47%)
- Other impacts noticed to a lesser extent were: bank erosion, off-highway vehicle impacts, litter, water levels, damage to vegetation, alteration of hot springs, and human waste, in that order.
- Impacts were more noticed on the lower section than the middle section
- When asked if these impacts were a real problem, respondents indicated damage to prehistoric sites, aircraft, human waste, and weeds were “moderate to big” (p. xx) problems

2.6. Views on River Management Actions and Policies

- There were four management actions that a majority of boaters opposed: assigning campsites, close Birch Creek, require users to bring firewood, and increase commercial trips
 - | Middle section boaters were more opposed to bringing their own firewood than lower section boaters
 - | Commercial boaters were more supportive of assigning sites than non-commercial
 - | Increasing commercial use was 65% opposed to by non-commercial boaters, but 69% of commercial boaters had no opinion
- Additional actions with more opposition than support include: increased patrols for boater assistance, increased law enforcement patrols, limit use, requirement for groups to stay together
 - | Middle section boaters were more opposed to limiting use than lower section boaters
 - | Expert boaters were more opposed to increased patrols and limiting use than less experienced boaters

| Commercial boaters were more supportive of use limits than non-commercial boaters

- Actions that a majority of boaters had no opinion on include: decrease commercial trips, improve launches, seasonal restrictions on Birch Creek use, and unrestricted use at Birch Creek

| Expert boaters did express a negative opinion toward Birch Creek restrictions

2.7. Livestock

- Most boaters noticed livestock impacts along the river including manure at camps, livestock at camps, trampled vegetation, and heavy grazing
- 78% of boaters reported livestock impacts having a negative effect on their experience
- Opposition was strongest from middle section boaters and non-commercial boaters

2.8. Boaters' Perceptions of Changes Since 1993

- Few boaters had been on the river prior to the 1993 flood. Of those that were, they felt conditions remained pretty much the same.
- Livestock impacts were the only factor noted as changed by majority of boaters, and impacts were said to have improved

2.9. Outstandingly Remarkable Values and Satisfaction

- The items most contributing to visitor satisfaction were scenery (65%), wilderness characteristics (49%), and solitude (43%)

3. Key Discussion Points

- Reasons for visiting the Owyhee focus more on the wilderness characteristics than the whitewater conditions
- The values for which the river was designated Wild & Scenic directly contribute to the visitor experience
- Few problems are noted by visitors, they are generally satisfied with their experience
- "Both ecological and social conditions appear to be in good condition" (p. xxiii)
- Higher use levels on the lower section are consistent with responses to crowding and conflict situations
- "More experienced boaters tend to be more opposed to management actions that might impinge on boater freedoms" (p. xxiv)

4. Management Recommendations

- With a fairly satisfied boater population, management restrictions are generally not needed at this time.

- Birch Creek should not be closed as a take-out and the road should continue to be maintained.

5. Research Design

Survey research, purposive sample (all members of a party were asked to complete a questionnaire)

5.1. Study Area

120 miles – two segments, Three Forks to Rome and Rome to Owyhee Reservoir

5.2. Data Collection Instruments

On-site questionnaire (included in report) – contacts were made at three locations: Rome, Birch Creek, and Leslie Gulch. Three separate survey instruments were used for this study: pre- and post-trip questionnaires for the University of Idaho research study and a post-trip only questionnaire for the Bureau of Land Management study.

5.3. Study Population

Non-motorized recreational boaters during March 24 – May 31, 2002

5.4. Sample Size

28 weekdays and 14 weekend days sampled, 614 boaters surveyed (BLM Survey N=253, University of Idaho Surveys, N=361)

5.5. List of Variables and Operational Definitions

5.5.1. Boater characteristics

Basic descriptors, trip characteristics, and past boating experiences.

5.5.2. Motivations

15 factors were used to ask questions about the importance of environmental characteristics and management practices in user's decision to boat the Owyhee.

5.5.3. Social impacts

Perceived crowding, number of encounters, problems caused by other users, expectations of social impacts.

5.5.4. Ecological impacts

Perceived environmental damage to include litter, erosion, damage to prehistoric sites, off-road vehicle impacts, biological impacts.

5.5.5. Livestock impacts

Boater opinions of livestock grazing and presence of livestock.

5.5.6. Managerial controls

Restrictions on use, site improvements, campsite assignments, river patrols.

5.5.7. Outstandingly Remarkable Values and Satisfaction

Importance of values, frequency of values encountered, trip satisfaction

6. Theories Used in Study

N/A

7. Concerns/Limitations

- Questionnaires were distributed by both BLM employees and a University of Idaho student, which may have affected responses due to the student being viewed as a neutral party and the BLM viewed as having a stake in the outcome.
- There may be an overrepresentation of lower river flows due to the sampling timing. This should not have much impact however because there are few questions relating to river flows.
- Representation of the middle segment was not as statistically strong as the lower segment.