

## Effect of Varied Question Format on Boaters' Norms

Hall, T., Shelby, B. & Rollof, D. (1996). Effect of varied question format on boaters' norms. *Leisure Sciences 18*, 193-204.

River(s): Clackamas River  
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### 1. Study Purpose

This study examines the effect of different question formats on “the percentage of boaters who (a) have a norm or (b) say encounters are not important...[and] on agreement among those who state personal norms.

### 2. Findings

Response rate of 95%.

#### 2.1. Effects of question format

- The format of the question (i.e., either two-choice or three-choice format) did affect the percentage of boaters who stated a norm and those who selected that the impact did not matter
- The percentage of boaters stating a norm was always lower in the three-choice format than the two-choice, but the difference varied (11 to 24%); the inclusion of an opt-out choice to say it mattered but they couldn't identify how much reduced the number of boaters that stated a norm
- The opt-out choice also affected the percentage of those for whom it did not matter to them, but not as large of an effect (5-19% drop in percentage when using the opt-out option)
- Format did not affect mean and median values for those who stated a norm, but did affect variability for two of the impacts (number of encounters and waiting time at launch)

### 3. Key Discussion Points

- In the three-choice format, those who choose the option of not providing a norm but still care about the impacts are essentially taken out of the other two choice options. When only given the two choices, the result “would lead managers to conclude that impacts are not important to some visitors for whom they are indeed important.

- This study supports the idea that “some respondents think certain impacts are important but would rather not specify a single cut-off value for the maximum acceptable level” (p. 199).
- With variability increasing with the two-choice format, it suggests that “fence-sitters” may have more extreme views or that respondents are guessing at values when forced to provide one. Thus, the three-choice option may provide a better measure of personal norms.
- The fact that question format impacts were less variable with the boaters in sight of others question suggests that people may have “clearly made up their minds” (p. 200) with this particular issue. The greater variability with the other two impacts may suggest that these are issues people haven’t thought as much about and are not as important to people.
- Variability may also be attributable to the fact that in heavy use areas (like the Clackamas) people may have a hard time tracking how many people are actually there, and therefore result in more variable norm responses. Also, the fact that the question format varied with closed and open-ended questions may have influenced the response percentages.
- Highly experienced boaters were not more likely to state a norm than those less experienced.

#### **4. Management Recommendations**

- Management application of the normative approach to establish personal norms for resource issues should take into account that question format can affect norm determination
- Pilot tests are important tools for creating a question format that is meaningful to the site and to respondents
- The paper recommends future research ideas to further explore the affects of question formats.

#### **5. Research Design**

Survey research, random sample, stratified by weekday/weekend

##### **5.1. Study Area**

13 miles of the Clackamas River

##### **5.2. Data Collection Instruments**

On-site questionnaire – researcher approached all boaters at their take-out; two different questionnaires were used, one with a two choice format and one with a three choice format (included “This impact matters to me but I can’t give a specific number,” p. 196)

### **5.3. Study Population**

Boaters on the river between March 12-May 30, 1994

### **5.4. Sample Size**

19 days sampled, 365 boaters surveyed

### **5.5. List of Variables and Operational Definitions**

#### **5.5.1. Acceptable number of encounters with other boaters**

Asked respondents to fill in a number of times it would be acceptable to see other boaters

#### **5.5.2. Acceptable waiting time at put-ins**

Asked respondents to fill in the number of minutes they would be willing to wait to launch

#### **5.5.3. Acceptable percentage of time with other boaters in sight while on river**

Asked respondent to choose a percentage displayed in increments of 10% (ranging from 0 to 100%) representing the maximum amount of time it is acceptable to see other boaters

## **6. Theories Used in Study**

Normative Approach – “people have personal standards, or personal norms, that define acceptable conditions and behaviors” (p. 194); and this approach “assumes that respondents can identify which of a variety of impacts affect their experience” (p. 194)

- The authors examine different question formats that are designed around the normative approach.

## **7. Concerns/Limitations**

The study varied the impact and response structure, which prevents the authors from fully explaining the effects of question formats.