Market research aims to help sustain charter fishing industry

A recent survey of fishing-charter customers is coming in handy as federal waters reopen after the Deepwater Horizon oil well disaster. Gulf Shores/Orange Beach Tourism (GSOBT), the destination marketing organization for Gulf Shores and Orange Beach, is using the information to attempt to attract more fishermen to Alabama.

The Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, the Marine Resources Division of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and GSOBT worked together on the research study.

It was conducted early this year and found that anglers chartering boats spent an average of more than $2,500 per fishing excursion, including the cost of the trip, accommodations, food, entertainment and travel.

The survey also identified the demographic and psychographic profiles of the current charter fishing customers, quantified the industry’s economic impact and identified consumer attitudes.

“We feel that because we have identified customer characteristics and attitudes, that information will assist us in reaching more customers and expanding the market,” said Colette Boehm, special projects director for GSOBT.

Researchers also conducted a PRIZM Target Analysis using a database of customers who had taken a fishing trip while in the area. PRIZM is a strategy for identifying marketing targets based on two observations:

- The best customers for your product are existing customers. The people who have already used your product or a similar one or other people like your existing customers are your most likely potential customers.
- Birds of a feather flock together. In choosing a place to live, people tend to seek out neighborhoods compatible to their lifestyles, where they find others with similar consumer behavior patterns.

“While the PRIZM portion of the project helps us determine where potential customers can be found, the survey helps us understand what messages are important to convey to them in our communications,” Boehm said.

Alabama’s charter fishing customers mostly come from the southeastern United States (89 percent). By examining the addresses of fishing customers, the study determined that the top

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Bobby Glenn and Cierra Martin received scholarships from the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium to attend the Ocean Science and Leadership Expedition (OSLE) in Cordova, Alaska. They learned about ocean science, the Exxon Valdez oil spill and marine debris during the 10-day camp offered by the Prince William Sound Science Center.

Bobby Glenn is a senior at the Mississippi School for Math and Science in Columbus, Miss., the state’s only public, residential high school for academically talented juniors and seniors. He is president of the Student Environmental Awareness League and a member of the Drama Club, Interfaith Dialogue, Ultimate Frisbee Team and Varsity Tennis Team. Bobby has served as a volunteer or intern with the Pascagoula River Audubon Center during his summers since 2007.

1. What activities did you participate in during the expedition?
   We had classes on leadership, kayak skills, the properties of water, lunar and tide cycles, wind and waves, the Coriolis Effect, a Dawn/dispersant demonstration, glaciers, marine ecosystems and nutrient cycles. Topics from guest speakers included the duties of the Coast Guard Marine Safety Unit, The Prince William Sound Regional Citizens’ Advisory Council and the Oil Spill Recovery Institute. During our recreational time, we took a day kayak, hiked on Worthington Glacier, hiked near a salmon run and even caught salmon with our bare hands.

2. What are a couple of things you learned about coastal sciences?
   I learned how oil is naturally decomposed by microscopic organisms, sedimentation and storms and the various ways estuaries are formed.

3. How did this experience affect your understanding of the Gulf oil spill?
   I was mildly disturbed that a lot of the cleanup methods during the Deepwater Horizon were experimental. This is a common practice because it is illegal to perform mock oil-spill scenarios in the United States.

4. In what ways is the BP oil spill different from the Exxon Valdez oil spill of 1989?
   The Deepwater Horizon oil spill, occurring from a busted seafloor pipe, had much wider geographical affect and spewed a lot more crude oil into the water than the shipwrecked oil tanker scenario known as the Exxon Valdez. Also the rocky beaches of the Prince William Sound allowed oil to settle, complicating cleanup and leaving oil lingering, which is a less likely scenario for the finer sedimentation of the Gulf Coast.

5. Did this Sea Grant-sponsored opportunity help you as you think about a future career?
   This opportunity fueled my passion for the environment and desire for a career in a marine biology/aquatic science/wildlife/biology related field. Some of my peers in OSLE also opened my mind to the possibility of a career in a similar field with more financial benefits.
What are some of the challenges involved in oil cleanup?

There are so many factors to take into consideration, such as the weather, time, money, environmental impact, wildlife, human safety, the media's response and equipment. Every aspect has to be considered thoroughly, and you have to act fast because if you don't, cleanup will become nearly impossible. I definitely came home with a newfound appreciation for all people involved in the cleanup process.

Did this opportunity help you as you think about a future career?

Yes. Before I embarked on this insanely wonderful expedition, I was really considering majoring in some type of environmental studies and then going on to law school. It's my aspiration to practice some type of environmental law, and this experience really confirmed to me that this is the road that I want to take.

Did you have the opportunity to talk about the Gulf oil spill to people not from the Gulf?

I had discussions about the Gulf and the spill with my peers and instructors, but everyone there is very environmentally conscious. They were and are still monitoring the spill, so there was not much that they didn't already know.

How did this experience affect your understanding of the Gulf spill?

Surprisingly, in Alaska, I learned a great deal more than I had living right along the coast right next to the Gulf oil spill. My awareness became greater on the severity of the Gulf spill, and I learned just what BP had done to clean up the oil and what the company is continuing to do. I also learned a lot about the best ways to clean up a spill and the pros and cons of methods, such as dispersing the oil, skimming it, burning the crude, etc.

What was most memorable about your trip to Alaska?

The kayaking expedition because of the combination of activities: hiking a glacier, kayaking through an ice field, setting up/breaking down a campsite while leaving absolutely no trace and spending time with a close-knit group of people. The group of students I went with was incredible and being with them and experiencing Alaska the real way is something I will never forget.
At no time in my life have I realized more the value many Americans place on our coastal ecosystems and the people who live and work in them.

The events stemming from the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill over the last six months and the likelihood of a long-term recovery period have taught us a painful lesson on the reality of coping with the occurrence of a high-magnitude disaster with very low probability. I am thankful for everyone working on the response, and now, the recovery effort. It has been a difficult situation for the federal and state agencies involved in the unified command structure and the apparent shortcomings of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. The perception of the command and control structure leaves out a public engagement structure equal to other programs within unified command. There is protest by many citizens who believe the current system has not been as transparent as needed. I expect this to be a vital lesson learned from the 2010 Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and that the weakness will be improved for future large-scale technological disasters.

The commercial, for-hire and recreational fisheries suffer from the unintended consequence of the distrust generated over the last six months. The debate over seafood safety continues while the industry begins the process of rebuilding consumer confidence in Gulf seafood. No one questioned the importance of closing federal and state waters to fishing during the spill. This precautionary approach likely prevented tainted seafood from entering the food supply chain. Early on, however, the industry asked questions about the protocol that would be used to reopen the closed waters.

The reopening protocol ensures seafood safety by using multiple layers of product testing once fishing grounds are free of oil sheen for an extended period of time. State waters in Alabama and Mississippi are reopened, and large sections of federal waters have now reopened. The reopening of state and federal waters has been met with far more skepticism than many expected. The resistance to reopening these waters is based on a variety of reasons, with seafood safety being only one.

Consumer confidence in Gulf of Mexico seafood is low. The lack of confidence in the safety of the seafood we have long enjoyed is not because of failed chemical analysis of tissues samples on finfish, shrimp, crabs and oysters. Instead, the lack of trust in seafood safety is simply a continuation of the distrust by citizens related to the response to the oil spill.

It is my opinion that the majority of the seafood industry (commercial and for-hire) wants to fish and also recognizes that consumer confidence has to be rebuilt as quickly as possible. They recognize it is hard to regain a customer once lost. High consumer confidence does not happen overnight, and the rebuilding process will require the fishing communities, food scientists, communications specialists and governmental agencies to work with processors and marketing groups. In fact, the additional testing for contaminants to ensure seafood safety might provide a golden opportunity to move beyond being “safe enough.” Instead, it may be an opportunity to promote a product that has undergone food safety analysis exceeding the levels used in other areas of the United States and abroad.

I believe the industry might benefit from incorporating the results from more conservative values used to calculate risk into their marketing plans. Preliminary analysis of data using higher consumption, a lower body weight and exposure duration provide further evidence of the safety of Gulf seafood. These results need to be incorporated into marketing plans implemented by the fishing industry. I also believe the seafood industry supports the call for long-term monitoring of seafood for oil tainting because its livelihood depends on ensuring consumer safety. The lasting reputation of Gulf of Mexico seafood needs to be that it is superior product safe enough to feed your children and not a reputation of inferior product tainted by oil or dispersants.

Charter fishing industry (Continued from page 1)

candidates for targeted marketing are all upscale groups. The highest-scoring cluster of charter fishing customers came from what the PRIZM analysis identifies as “fast-track families.” Fast-track families include upscale parents aged 35-54 and their kids. Most of the parents work in management, own their homes and are college graduates.

The second main group worthy of targeting is the “country squires.” These 35-to 54-year-olds graduated college and have children. Some attended additional school. Most of them own their homes and have jobs in management.

The third group is described as “country casuals.” They typically are upscale adults, 45 to 64 years old, who do not have kids. They likely are college graduates with management positions.

As far as what is important to fishermen, in the online survey, 99 percent revealed that the knowledge and courtesy of the captain and crew were “very important” or “somewhat important,” making it the highest-ranked factor on the list.

Other factors anglers marked as important included the amount of fish caught (96 percent); cleanliness of the boat (95 percent); price of the trip (91 percent); amount of fish kept (88 percent); and variety of fish caught (81 percent).
**Peer listeners prepare to lend an ear**

*Program focuses on helping friends, family with emotional stress from oil spill*

Everyone needs someone to talk to from time to time. For people dealing with the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, having friends to talk to about day-to-day stresses can lead them toward healing and coping.

About 150 residents from the Alabama and Mississippi Gulf Coast attended one of four training sessions to become volunteer peer listeners in a program coordinated by the Gulf of Mexico Sea Grant Programs, U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperative Extension, Auburn University Marine Center, Mobile Bay National Estuary Program, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Gulf of Mexico Regional Collaboration Team, NOAA Gulf Coast Services Center and Grand Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Peer listeners learned how to make people feel at ease and talk about what they are feeling. They also learned characteristics of a good listener. Other topics included communications skills, managing anger, identifying depression and assessing suicide risk. They were encouraged to use the skills to bloom where they are planted and work with friends, family, co-workers and neighbors.

“Peer listening is effective because many people who need help may be reluctant to seek out mental-health professionals after a technological disaster,” said LaDon Swann, director of the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium. “This training gives people skills to help them create a social safety net in their communities.”

Sociologist Steven Picou of the University of South Alabama, who implemented the peer-listener training in Alaska after the Exxon Valdez oil spill and has performed extensive research on communities and disasters, conducted three of the sessions.

Another 117 people received peer-listening training in sessions held in Florida and Louisiana. More sessions are planned.

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**Processors use senses to offer additional layer of seafood safety**

The Deepwater Horizon oil spill has presented Gulf seafood workers with their biggest challenge yet, but they are prepared to keep their industry afloat with all the resources they have, including their noses.

In August, about 80 seafood workers gathered at the Mississippi State University Coastal Research and Extension Center in Biloxi, Miss., or at the Auburn University Marine Extension and Research Center in Mobile, Ala., to learn how to use their sense of smell to identify oil-tainted seafood as an additional precautionary measure. The sensory evaluation exercise was part of the Harvest from Open Waters, or HOW, training coordinated by the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium and the Cooperative Extension Service.

“State and federal agencies have tested shrimp, finfish, crab and oyster samples from Gulf waters, and all test results have indicated that the samples are not contaminated with oil,” said Dave Burrage, extension leader with the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium. “But seafood workers want to further ensure the safety of seafood by testing at their own facilities. They are guaranteeing that their buyers are getting the best possible products.”

Importantly, the voluntary training helps seafood processors confirm that they are dealing only in untainted product.

“No one is relying on the sensory analysis to open up waters to harvest, but it’s a very strong, practical tool for the industry to use as a means of assurance above and beyond what’s required by law,” said Bill Walton, an assistant professor at Auburn University and extension specialist with Alabama Cooperative Extension System, who helped organize the workshops.

Karen Templeton of Mississippi State University Ag Communications contributed to this article.

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**Website seeks information on oil-spill research, monitoring activities**

Scientists performing oil-spill-related research and monitoring activities are encouraged to enter their information into the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill Research and Monitoring Activities Database (http://gulfseagrant.org/oilspill/database.htm).

People interested in viewing the information can perform queries or view all activities on the website.

Numerous organizations have provided input and endorse this online clearinghouse, which contains brief descriptions of oil-spill-related research, monitoring and restoration activities that are occurring at or funded by universities and state and federal agencies.

A webpage has been developed to list opportunities for researchers and others to find oil-spill-related research, monitoring and restoration funding opportunities: http://gulfseagrant.org/oilspill/rfp.htm.
Director to serve on recovery commission
Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Director LaDon Swann was one of 34 scientists and business leaders named to the Mississippi Gulf of Mexico Commission, a broad-based panel that will report on the impact of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill and aid in the development of a long-term vision to enhance the Gulf of Mexico for the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

More information on the oil spill: gulfseagrant.org

Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium
703 East Beach Drive • Ocean Springs, MS 39564
E-mail: melissa.schneider@usm.edu
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SYMPOSIUM TO BUILD BRIDGES TO COASTAL HEALTH

Registration is now open for the Alabama-Mississippi Bays and Bayous Symposium, which will be held Dec. 1-2 at the Mobile Convention Center in Mobile, Ala. The symposium provides an opportunity for the community to learn about the state of our coastal environment. For registration information, visit www.mobilebaynep.com/baysandbayous.

The two-day symposium, hosted by the Mobile Bay National Estuary Program and Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, will include oral and poster presentations, keynote speakers and networking opportunities with the goal of bringing scientists together with local industry and community groups to better educate each other about the status of knowledge about the Northern Gulf coastal ecosystem and processes that alter it. The theme of this year’s symposium is “Science, Industry, Community: Building Bridges to Coastal Health.”