

Adding Value to South Carolina Charter Fishing Services: Perspectives of Charter Boat Captains

Jarrett R. Bachman^a, Laura W. Jodice^a, William E. Hammitt^a, Chi-Ok Oh^b

^aClemson University, Clemson, SC, USA

^bMichigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

E-mail addresses: jrbachm@clemson.edu (J. Bachman), ljodice@clemson.edu (L. Jodice), hammitw@clemson.edu (W. Hammitt), ohc@msu.edu (C. Oh).

Abstract

Recreational charter boat operators in the United States South Atlantic region face numerous challenges to business survival. These challenges include rising fuel costs, increasingly restrictive regulations on catch size and quota, decline in customer base, and competition with other coastal venues, services and amenities catering to tourists. As a result, in order for the commercial recreational fishing businesses (i.e., recreational charter, head or party, and inshore guide boats; hereafter 'charter' for simplicity) to continue to provide charter boat services, more sustainable solutions are required. This paper explored potential for enhancing the long-term prosperity and sustainability of the tourism-based charter fishing industry in South Carolina through value-added services that are not specific to catching fish but are oriented to experiencing the marine environment.

Charter operators must find viable solutions to compete with other coastal tourism services for the value received. Work by Jodice, Lacher, Norman and Hughes (2010) documented some decline in the charter industry and increased interest among charter operators in developing stronger linkages with tourism marketing programs. Interviews conducted for the recent NOAA socio-economic assessment of saltwater charters suggested that some operators in SC are already adapting by switching to smaller vessels and/or focusing on providing trips closer to shore (Holland, Oh, Larkin & Hodges, 2012). The goal of this research was to identify opportunities for and challenges to adding value to existing for-hire, recreational offshore charter boat services and trip offerings. The study focused on identifying the range of perceptions and experiences among South Carolina charter boat captains about value-added services that are 1) currently provided or could be provided, 2) in demand by tourist anglers and non-anglers seeking access to offshore marine environments and 3) possible within regulatory restrictions.

The full list of 494 addresses for South Carolina charter license holders for 2012 was provided by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources to the Research Team. The address list was stratified by the three main tourism regions on the coast: Myrtle Beach, Charleston, and Hilton Head/Beaufort to assure participation from a range of operators and fishing ports. Active operation of each entry on the list was confirmed by searching for online advertising or listings for the captain and associate vessels. Based on this criteria, license owners who appeared to be inactive were removed from the final list. Thirty individuals were then randomly selected from each of the three regions. Invitations for interview were mailed to all individuals in the final sample list and then the researchers followed up with non-respondents by phone or email. To achieve 15 interviews per region and assure saturation, an alternate list (those not selected by the random sampling) was used to identify nearest neighbors (i.e., in same port as other interviews within a region). These alternates were contacted (in person or by phone) while the interviewers were working within a port. Ultimately the sample included 43 interviews.

Each member of the research team (n=4) reviewed the transcribed interview text to identify primary themes and topics for analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2009). The research team was in agreement on all themes and topics before coding began. Two researchers with knowledge of the project and of fishing and recreation and resource management independently coded data into the selected themes and topics. After initial coding was complete, inter-rater reliability was 89.2% (Holsti, 1969). The two researchers discussed disagreements in coding and reached near perfect agreement.

A total of five main themes and seven topics were developed from the transcribed interview data and phenomenology as seen in Figure 1. Two of these themes had two distinct

topics within them. The other three themes had one topic associated with it. The seven topics were:

Outside Barriers - Financial: *“The rising cost of operating charter boats has caused the industry to make changes in the type and price of charter trips.”*¹

Outside Barriers - Government: *“Government regulations related to fishing create a negative impact on my ability to run a successful business.”*

Connecting with Customers: *“The more personable and friendly I am as a charter captain, the more my customers will be satisfied, develop a continued interest and love for fishing, and want to return as a repeat customer.”*

Networking: *“A better networking relationship with the community and other charter boat captains along with an increased support for marketing would increase the success of my business.”*

Value-Added Services - Knowledge: *“An increase in my level of knowledge about the local history, local culture, and marine environment would enhance my charter fishing trips for my customers.”*

Value-Added Services - Amenities: *“There are a variety of amenity-related things that are offered on charter boats in the industry, and individual captains have differing opinions related to the importance of these things to customer satisfaction.”*

Business Growth: *“I offer non-fishing related trips in addition to my fishing charter because it is a necessary way to increase the success of my business.”*

The captain’s perspective on the potential for adding value to the charter fishing industry gives insight into the actual and potential developments to improve the success and sustainability of charter fishing in South Carolina, a service used by thousands of tourists to the SC coast every year (Holland et al., 2012). The captain population in South Carolina is a diverse one from many perspectives such as age, education, and experience. In order to capitalize on the talent and creativity of these captains and grow and stabilize this industry, capacity building strategies need to address the themes and topics that were found as a result of this research.

¹ Italicized quotations for each topic description below are summaries of the data in the voice of a typical charter captain.

References

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