



¹I once caught a fish "THIS BIG": Using Participatory Photovoice to Understand Michigan's Great Lakes Anglers

Final Narrative Report

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Abstract

Recreational fishing is essential to Michigan's economy and culture, and recreational fishing takes place on thousands of inland lakes, four of the five Great Lakes, and numerous rivers and creeks. Providing fishing opportunities for all stakeholders requires a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and what makes fishing unique for different recreationists. Despite recent increases in women's fishing participation in Michigan and national efforts to recruit more women into recreational fishing, we still know very little about why women fish. Previous studies of recreational anglers typically omit women altogether or, in the case of social surveys, ask men and women the same questions. Gendered expectations and related social processes influence how people interact with natural resources and what outdoor recreation activities are perceived as appropriate for women. This study applies an ecofeminist lens and participatory photovoice process to examine 15 Michigan women's recreational fishing experiences. The combination of individual photography, facilitated group discussion, and community presentations provided a unique setting for women to share and compare their unique fishing experiences and memories and self-reflect in a meaningful, participant-driven context. Using grounded theory analysis, we identified some of the meanings these women ascribe to their fishing experiences. For them, fishing provides a means to forge closer connections with themselves and the natural world and gain a sense of strength, independence, and empowerment as they overcome gendered expectations and related self-perceptions. Employing photovoice as a feminist participatory methodology can help women build new connections with each other and their social networks and illuminate valuable yet previously untold leisure stories and narratives.

Keywords: recreational fishing, women, gender, photovoice, community-engaged research, participatory action research

¹ Image credit: Amber Voght

Project Summary

Background

Women's fishing participation is on the rise in Michigan,¹ yet we know very little about how gender impacts women's motivations to fish, the meanings they ascribe to their fishing experiences, and the process-oriented benefits they derive from fishing.^{2,3,4} Sport and leisure, including outdoor recreational pursuits like fishing, are cultural practices that are impacted by gender norms and expectations. Gender-related processes impact how individuals are socialized into fishing, how likely they are to continue fishing across different stages of their life course, and both internal and external perceptions of fishing experiences. Women in particular face many gendered constraints to accessing outdoor recreation activities and being acknowledged in leisure spaces, including limited time due to expectations of family responsibilities, socialization to prefer or avoid certain activities, and broader cultural signals about what is and isn't appropriate for women.^{5,6,7,8}

However, most existing studies of recreational anglers employ male-biased social surveys and/or use "gender" as a substitute for binary sex.^{9,10,11,12} These studies typically rely on surveys and, while they do provide some insights into motivations for fishing based on reported gender identity, cannot account for more nuanced gendered processes and associated gendered experiences. In general, studies of women in a sport-fishing context are largely omitted from outdoor recreation, leisure, and human dimensions of wildlife studies. This study applies a participatory, visual method to better understand the meanings women derive from recreational fishing and the external and internal gendered expectations they navigate.

Research Design & Methods

Case studies allow for contextualizing, confirming, disproving, and showing unique cases to understand the operational links between phenomenon,¹³ including the deep contextualization that lends itself to understanding women's perspectives and experiences.¹⁴ This case study included two sites, or embedded units of analysis.¹⁵ The rural Keweenaw Peninsula in Michigan's Upper Peninsula and urban/suburban Metro Detroit region both provide year-round opportunities for recreational fishing, including competitive fishing events. Both regions showed recent increases in women's fishing participation from 2000 to 2016,¹⁶ and Metro Detroit offers multiple organized fishing clubs.

Between June 2018 and June 2019, we conducted a photovoice project in each study area. The photovoice process in each location included participant recruitment, an initial group meeting or orientation, time for individual photography, additional group meetings, and a closing public exhibit or presentation (for a complete project timeline see Appendix A).¹⁷ We recruited participants by contacting recreational fishing clubs, advertising more broadly online and in printed flyers in public spaces, and snowball sampling after making initial contacts. Fifteen women (8 in the Keweenaw and 7 in metro-Detroit) ranging in age from 20-62 years old participated throughout the entire course of the project. The Michigan Technological University Institutional Review Board approved this study.

A sequence of at least three facilitated meetings, typically scheduled one-three months apart, were held in each region. Initial meetings were held to introduce the photovoice method, establish participation commitments, allow the participants and researchers to get to know each

other better, and begin to establish group goals. Attendees were provided with open-ended questions (e.g., “What does fishing mean to you?” “Why do you fish?”) that prompted group discussions and individual photography. In subsequent meetings called “photowalks”, participants shared their photos and discussed their meanings as a group. Participants were also asked to create written narratives to supplement their photographs and form “photostories”. At the close of the project, the Keweenaw group held a group photography exhibit at the Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw in Houghton, MI and the Metro Detroit participants presented to the Metro-West Steelheaders Association in Livonia, MI, a local sport fishing club. The Carnegie Museum exhibit opening event and closing presentation in Livonia were both attended by approximately 60 people including family members, friends, strangers, and state level fisheries managers.

Figure 1. Keweenaw participants sharing their stories during a photowalk.



Participants’ photostories, transcribed group discussions, and researcher observations and analytical memos were all included in data collection and analyzed using grounded theory as outlined by Charmaz (2006) and aided by NVivo software.^{18,19} Group meeting transcripts, photo narratives, and participants’ reflective comments were analyzed using grounded theory. Grounded theory includes data coding, analytical memoing, and development of a case-specific theory or theories that remains true to, and foregrounds, participants’ own voices, meanings, and experiences, rather than relying on predetermined hypotheses or researcher assumptions.²⁰

Key Findings

Three major process-oriented codes emerged from the analysis. It is important to note that these meanings and processes were often highly interwoven and rarely, if ever, working in isolation. First, recreational fishing acts as a facilitator for women to connect to themselves and nature through physically and socially challenging yet spiritually uplifting outdoor experiences. The explicit mention of water - being near it, on it, and having multiple sensory experiences with water and/or “nature” was a major source of self-identification:

Sometimes, I think for some people more than others, water is an essential element to our well-being. [...] There’s earth, water, air, a basic.. I’m not so fond of flying, there’s people

who are afraid of water. Versus I need water. It does something for me that I can't even describe, but I'm a water person. And so part of it is just being on the water. [...] I think that's where I feel myself the most, is with water whether it's in a boat or sitting next to a river or whatever. That's me. I'm a water person. And so it really restores my connection with me. - Jane²

I liked what you said there too though about just being there at the water. I love being there watching the water, smelling the water, I love seeing the birds or listening to like I said the loons. I love it when the loons start up. It's just being by the water that is awesome too. - Pamela

Figure 2. "Already worth it." by Beverly Maynard

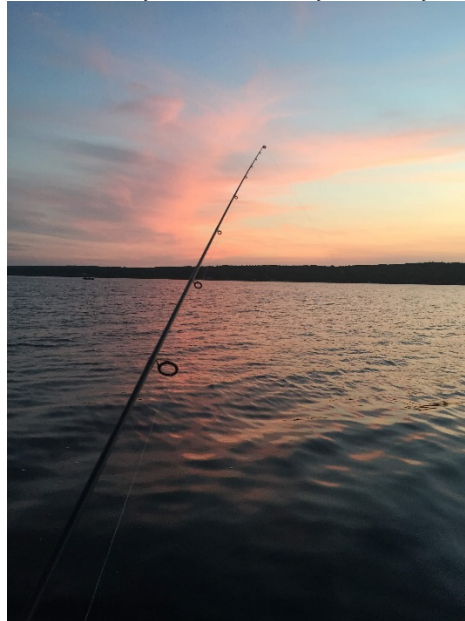


Figure 3. "Two-Hearted entering Lake Superior" by Denise Vandeville



²All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

Second, these women frequently negotiate gender norms and discrimination to begin fishing, continue to participate, and bolster their confidence. The participants' stories reflected the reinforcement of gender norms and opportunities to resist gender discourses. For example, despite being an experienced angler who fished her entire life, one participant still had to negotiate others' assumption that, as a young woman, she didn't know enough:

My first high school job was working retail, and my old boss used to love fishing on the weekends. And he told me he wanted me to come to this and just hang out and see if I liked it. It was terrible being the only woman there. Everybody looks at you like this girl doesn't know what she's talking about, doesn't know what she's doing. And then they finally heard what I had to say, and now I'm the first board member that's a female. So I guess they took a liking to me. - Heather

Figures 4-5. Credit: Sarah McNichol



And third, participating in the photovoice process facilitated the emergence of previously unacknowledged histories and new self-reflections for these women and other women in their social networks. The following passage demonstrates the social isolation of women anglers that can occur, even within their own families. In this instance, a participant discovered that her great aunt was actually an avid angler in her youth, but until sharing this project with her aunt, the participant had never known about her aunt's passion for fishing:

Barb: And because of this project, this is my great aunt, and I found out that she was a fishing fanatic in her early life, and she told this wonderful story about fishing over on the eastern side and having to share this fish with this bear that was following her in the 60s. [...]

Researcher: So you just heard that story?

Barb: I just heard that story. [...] So that was kinda cool that was totally from this project. I would've never even knew that she was a fisherman, we never spoke about it before.

Conclusion

This project applied a participatory approach to engaging with 15 Michigan women anglers. While this study is not representative of all women anglers, it serves as a helpful starting point for understanding the issues women face in a highly gendered outdoor recreation setting. Wildlife-associated outdoor pursuits like fishing and hunting are rooted in long-standing, gender-based societal expectations and histories. The result is that men's experiences are centered and women's visibility is excluded from the sport.^{21,22} This signals to potential outdoor recreationists and society at large that women do not belong in recreational fishing spaces.

The complex social nature of outdoor recreation experiences challenges researchers to invoke creative means to understand participant narratives and meanings, and the photovoice process demonstrated how, if given the opportunity, socially and culturally marginalized leisure participants can actively construct their own meanings about their relationships with outdoor leisure experiences, nature, and themselves. Women are often conceptualized as a single group instead of a varied and diverse group of smaller groups or individuals with varying attitudes, actions, and reactions.^{23,24} This can perpetuate stereotypes and assumptions that environments mean the same thing to different groups of people.²⁵ For instance, we found that some women use their own internalized gendered assumptions to subvert gender narratives, while others resisted typical notions of what is gender-appropriate in order to enjoy a sport they love.

Figure 6. "As Good As It Gets!" by Karen Westphal.



Appendix A: Project Timeline

Date	Project Milestone
May 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approved by Michigan Technological University's Institutional Review Board to conduct human subjects research. • Participant recruitment.
June 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held first meeting with research participants in Houghton, Michigan.
August 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held additional “photowalk” meeting with research participants in Houghton, Michigan. • Held two research meetings with research participants in metro-Detroit (Berkley, MI & Redford, MI).
September 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presented early findings at Integrative Conservation Conference in Athens, GA.
October 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-presented research findings with research participant at State of Lake Superior conference in Houghton, MI.
Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional “photowalk” meetings with research participants in both study sites.
January 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-presented research findings with participant at Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference in Cleveland, OH.
Nov. 2018-Feb. 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Held final exhibit/presentation planning meetings with research participants in both study sites.
Feb.-Mar. 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keweenaw group holds public photography exhibit at Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw in Houghton, MI. • Exhibit opening reception attended by >60 local residents.
June 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Metro-Detroit groups presented at Metro-West Steelheaders Association meeting in Livonia, MI. • Presented related findings to Michigan Department of Natural Resources at Lake Superior basin meeting.
August 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Submitted article for review to peer-reviewed journal.

Appendix B: Carnegie Museum Exhibit Summary

Figure 7. Carnegie Museum of the Keweenaw in Houghton, MI.



Figure 8. Keweenaw project member setting up the exhibit.



Figure 9. “Connections: Stories From Women Who Fish” exhibit welcome poster.



Figure 10. Carnegie Exhibit Opening Night.



Figure 11. Carnegie Museum Opening Night.



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