

Five reasons why I think the Kids Free Fishing License Program is successful (from an outside perspective)

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Even though I have been with the Department for little over a year, I still consider myself an outsider looking into the wildlife world. I consider this perception an advantage. I can offer unbiased insights, find blind spots, and can share knowledge from a different world that others are unable to see. This is why I wanted to share an ingenious program that the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) has made public. I'll also add my perspective as to why I think it's such a great program.

With a background in both natural resources and journalism, I knew that I wanted to pursue science communication to bridge the gap between biologists and the public. I received most of my experience educating Nevadans on wildfire preparedness and now I'm a Public Information Officer – Publication Coordinator at NDOW.

I know I am preaching to the choir among wildlife communication specialists, but my hope is that after reading this article, you can implement the same type of program in your state, or you can apply my science communication perspective to your communication, marketing or educational projects to aid in its success.

Now let's get down to the meat and potatoes of this story. In 2023, NDOW implemented the Kids Free Fishing License Program. This program is 100% donation driven that gives youth (Nevada residents and non-residents) 12 to 17 years old, a free, one-year fishing license. Since emerging in 2023, 15,239 free youth licenses were issued, and NDOW has accrued \$246,953.00 in donations to purchase licenses. Almost 65% of the youth who received these licenses are new customers. Continue reading to learn more about the program and why through the lens of my outreach perspective, I know this program is a success.

1) Identify your message, issue or problem:

Your agency is most likely experiencing a similar issue, but NDOW knew that Nevada hunting and fishing licenses are declining along with the once popular notion that wildlife exists for human use.

2) Know your audience:

Understanding the audience can create an impactful and relevant message that resonates with individuals and changes behavior. One way to better understand your target audience is to implement a survey.

In 2022, NDOW was involved in a Nevada 2022 Relevancy Survey that measured the relevance that Nevada adults place upon wildlife and wildlife-associated recreation. Among a large amount of other helpful data, the survey found that cost was one of the top five barriers that the public experiences when they consider spending time outdoors or enjoying the outdoors. Since the cost of licenses was a barrier, NDOW wanted to offer free youth licenses.

3) Collaborate, collaborate, collaborate:

Before implementation, collaboration with other like-minded individuals helps to work out the kinks. During a brainstorm meeting, a colleague suggested that the Department provide free licenses to foster kids. Another colleague built off that idea to create a free license program for ALL youth.

4) Pivot from barriers:

The Kids Free Fishing License Program repeatedly encountered problems, especially objections from others. I love how the program implementors discovered solutions to barriers. In most cases, the solutions disproved the push back from others. Aside from the cost barrier noted above, the following are a list of other barriers:

- NDOW knew that the Department couldn't offer free youth hunting and fishing licenses, as these free licenses would impact NDOW's source of funding. Program implementors solicited donations from individuals and organizations. Those donation dollars purchased the licenses and contributed towards the Department's funding source. As mentioned earlier, since the program's nascence, NDOW has accrued a total of \$246, 953.00 in donations.
- Department leaders and staff voiced concern that the free youth license should serve 12 to 15-year-olds and that the older kids could "figure it out". Program implementors wanted to reduce barriers and allow all youth the opportunity to fish or hunt for free. As of today, data shows that about 28% of kids receiving the free license are 16 to 17-year-olds.
- Disagreements arose over offering non-resident youth free licenses. Again, program implementers argued that this program's goal was to reduce

barriers and to not create more. Since 2023, data has shown that 25% of the Kids Free Fishing License program donors are non-residents. If the program excluded non-residents, there would have been a reduction in a quarter of the donation funds.

- Lastly, concerns arose over youth who would “take advantage” of the program. Colleagues felt that families who were able to purchase licenses, should pay and not receive a free license. NDOW understood that families of low socioeconomic status could disproportionately benefit, but they didn’t want that to limit the program’s success and left the program free to all youth.

5) Quid pro quo:

Quid pro quo is a Latin term meaning “something for something,” where one thing is given or received in return for another. I think it was ingenious that NDOW identified cost as a barrier and the Department offered a free youth combination license.

The following are the effects of offering this free fishing license program:

- Youth would experience a positive outdoor interaction.
- Youth would experience health benefits from being outdoors, which makes our community stronger and healthier.
- Youth might become hooked on wildlife outdoor recreation and become life-long wildlife supporters.
- Those youth who become life-long wildlife supports will promote conservation.
- More hunting and fishing licenses result in more funding opportunities for the Department.

As someone who enjoys communication and education with the intent to change behavior, I am excited to learn how NDOW implemented the Kids Free Fishing License Program. If you have further questions, contact:

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