

# Relevancy Roulette- Understanding the Perceptions and Needs of the General Public and Our Traditional Users

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Whether growing numbers of hunters and anglers, protecting threatened wildlife, or promoting healthy ecosystems, a strong relationship with the public is vital for government agencies taking on the work of conservation. To better build a foundation of collaboration, agencies must first understand how they are perceived by the people they work for.

Beginning in 2023, Southwick Associates began conducting research that would form two reports on the Public Perception of State Fish & Wildlife Agencies; the first, published in 2023, on behalf of the 12 states of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) and the second, published in 2025, for the 11 states of the Midwest Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (MAFWA). Lou Cornicelli, senior research analyst for Southwick Associates, presented on the findings at the 2025 ACI Conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

The studies highlighted the importance of understanding public perception beyond the core audience of agency customers who participate in revenue-generating activities and are traditionally targeted by the bulk of agency communications. To this end, Southwick broke down respondents into three categories: licensed hunters and anglers, other outdoor participants (who engage with natural resources through nonconsumptive means, such as hiking and birdwatching), and nonparticipants.

The full reports and detailed results can be found at [SouthwickAssociates.com](https://SouthwickAssociates.com).

The studies found similar results in both regions. While broad public approval was encountered for fish and wildlife agencies, lower levels of public understanding were reported for their inner workings, particularly when it came to funding and R3 initiatives. Even amongst licensed hunters and anglers, recruitment efforts were consistently ranked as a low priority. This disconnect creates a question of relevancy when it comes to the programs that agencies depend on to build and maintain the paying customer base. How to bridge that gap in public relations emerged as a key question.

At the conference, Cornicelli broke down several takeaways from the study to help guide agencies looking to answer that question in a period of heightened uncertainty surrounding funding. Ultimately, increasing the public's understanding of how agencies operate is vital. To shift this perception, the results encourage going beyond traditional media.

Southwick highlights the importance of maintaining a quality agency website that is accessible and easily navigable for hunters and anglers as well as other outdoor participants. Additionally, agency use of social media is emphasized for reaching the invested public beyond direct customers. When approaching these efforts, Cornicelli laid out a broad scope of content. Responses to the study show that awareness of what agencies do is not as pressing. Rather, 'feel-good,' noncontroversial stories that can appeal to all groups of outdoors users help to heighten the sense of relevancy regardless of how a particular individual might prefer to engage with their state's natural resources.

Southwick has partnered with DJ Case and Associates to create the ACI Outreach and Relevancy Toolkit, centered on a branding of "Making It Last." The goal of this updated campaign is to increase reach to non-consumptive users without alienating the base of hunters and anglers. Coupled with the results of the initial studies, they provide multi-faceted resources for agencies looking to chart a path forward.

As changing times alter the way the public engages with the outdoors and learns about the opportunities available to them, these reports offer a look at where fish and wildlife agencies stand with the public and present possibilities to map a path into the future.