

APPENDIX G: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A brave woman: USFWS

- Community Survey Results for Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge

Community Survey Results for Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge

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Introduction

The National Wildlife Refuge System, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), is the largest system of public lands in the world dedicated to wildlife conservation. There are over 545 national wildlife refuges nationwide, encompassing 95 million acres. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-57, USC688dd) is the guiding legislation for managing these lands. It requires the USFWS to develop a 15-year comprehensive conservation plan (CCP) for every refuge by the year 2012. Each CCP will describe a vision and desired future condition for the refuge, and will outline goals, objectives, and management strategies for each refuge's habitat and visitor service programs. The CCP process for Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was initiated in 2006. As part of this effort, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sponsored a survey conducted by the Policy Analysis and Science Assistance Branch of U.S. Geological Survey/Fort Collins Science Center.

Purpose of Survey

This survey was designed to provide information from local community residents to the USFWS planning team, which includes Refuge personnel as well as regional staff, for use in their environmental analysis. Its results inform the team of preferences for services and activities on the Refuge and of future management strategies. Specifically, it addresses recreational activities in which area residents currently participate and the activities they desire to have offered on the Refuge. It also identifies preferences for proposed management changes, and gauges public understanding and knowledge about the Refuge so that future communications regarding management decisions can be most effective. The targeted recipients of the survey were residents of communities in the counties that touch the acquisition boundary of Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge (RRVNWR or the Refuge).

Community Resident Profile

A survey distribution area was designed through collaboration with Rappahannock River Valley NWR staff. Surveys were sent to a random sample of local community residents in Essex, Caroline, King George, Lancaster, Middlesex, Northumberland, Richmond, and Westmoreland counties. Surveys were only sent to residents of the counties listed. A total of 1200 surveys were mailed, and 368 were returned for a response rate of 35 percent. Residents in these counties have a long history in the area, having lived in the Northern Neck or Middle Peninsula, on average, between 31 and 32 years. About half of the respondents indicated that their families had lived in the area at least two generations, and 10 percent stated that their families had been in the area five or more generations.



Rappahannock River scenes: USFWS

Recreation Experience along the Rappahannock River

Respondents were asked to specify what activities they participate in along the Rappahannock River. Around half of residents participate in self-guided nature or wildlife viewing, boat fishing, bird watching, and bank fishing (figure G.1). Less than a quarter of respondents participate in hunting activities. Respondents were asked to indicate where specifically along the River they participate in each activity (map G.1). This information can aid.

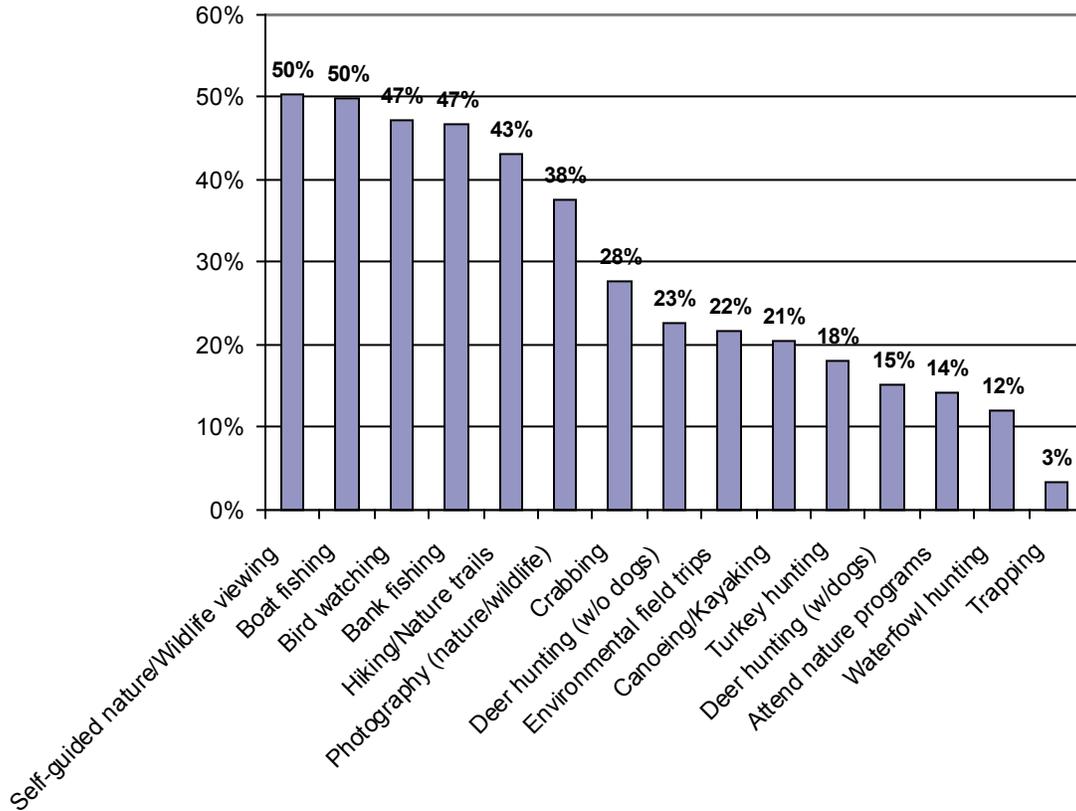
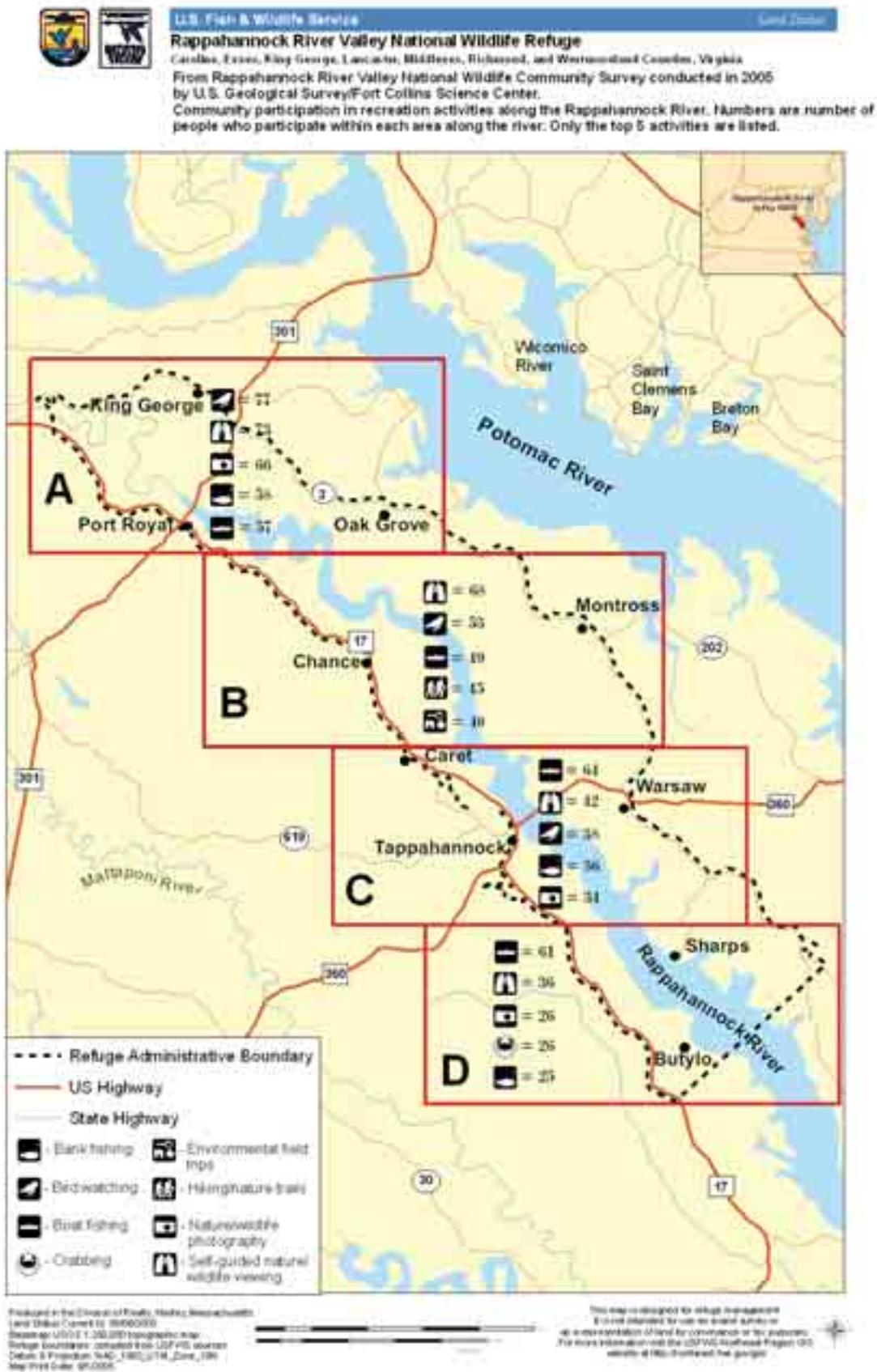


Figure G.1. Percent of community members participating in activities along the Rappahannock River.



Map G.1. Community participation in recreation activities along the Rappahannock River

Numbers are number of people who participate within each area along the river. Only the top 5 activities are listed. Refuge personnel in understanding where services can be most useful if offered. Self guided nature/wildlife viewing was one of the most frequently reported activities in all areas.

Communication about Natural Resources along the Rappahannock River

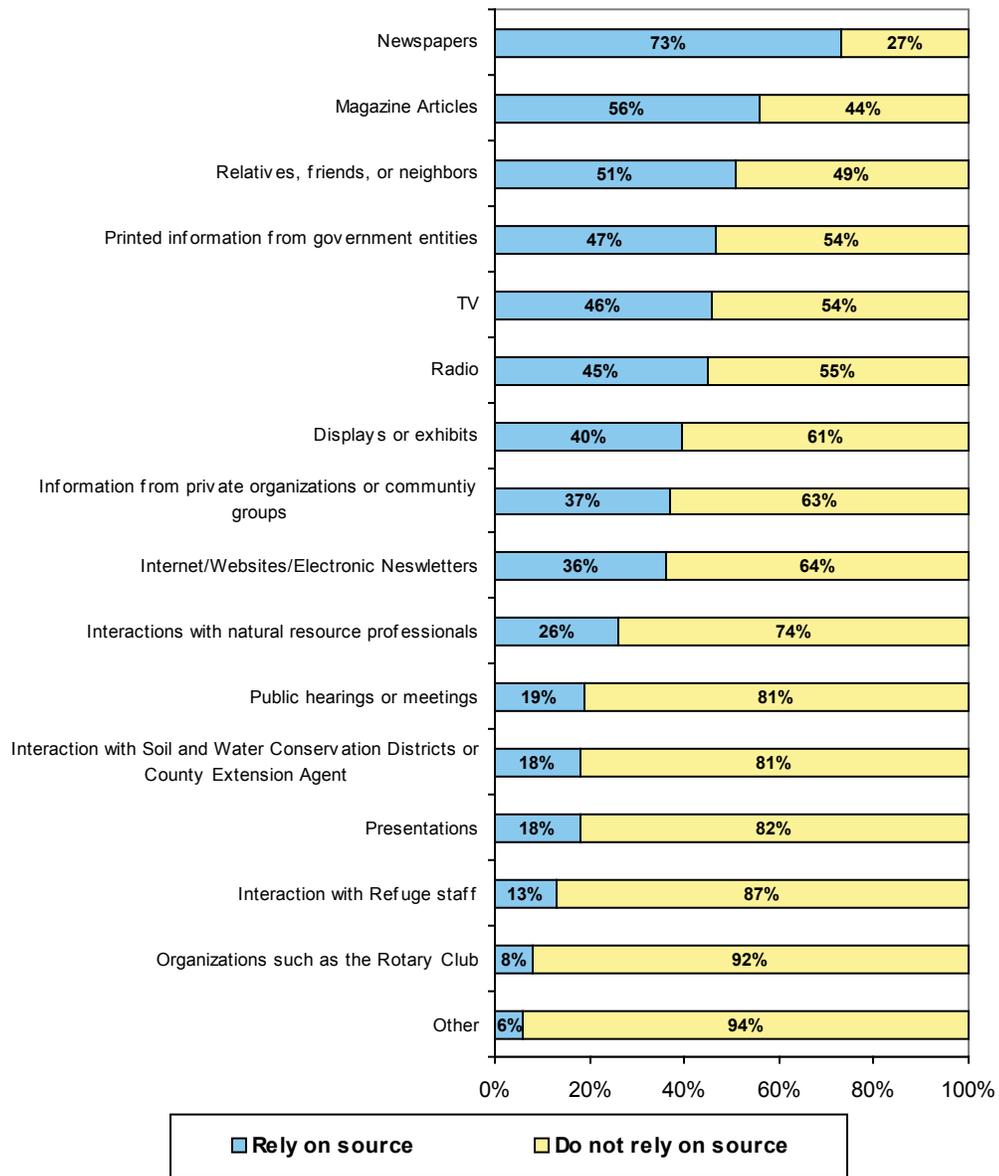


Figure G.2. Resident reliance on sources for news and information about natural resources along the Rappahannock River.

Survey respondents were asked about the sources they use for information about natural resources along the Rappahannock River. The sources fell into two categories: those that involve one-way communication (information is transferred in one direction without interaction) and those that involve two-way communication (there is an exchange of information which includes conveying and receiving of ideas). Residents rely mostly on one-way communication sources (such as newspapers, radio, and television), but do not rely on them a great deal. The source that they rely on most is newspapers (Figure G.2). The only two-way communication that is relied on much is information from relatives, friends or neighbors. Hunters tend to rely more on printed information from government entities and natural resource professionals, but this is not surprising given the interaction with game wardens and the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries.

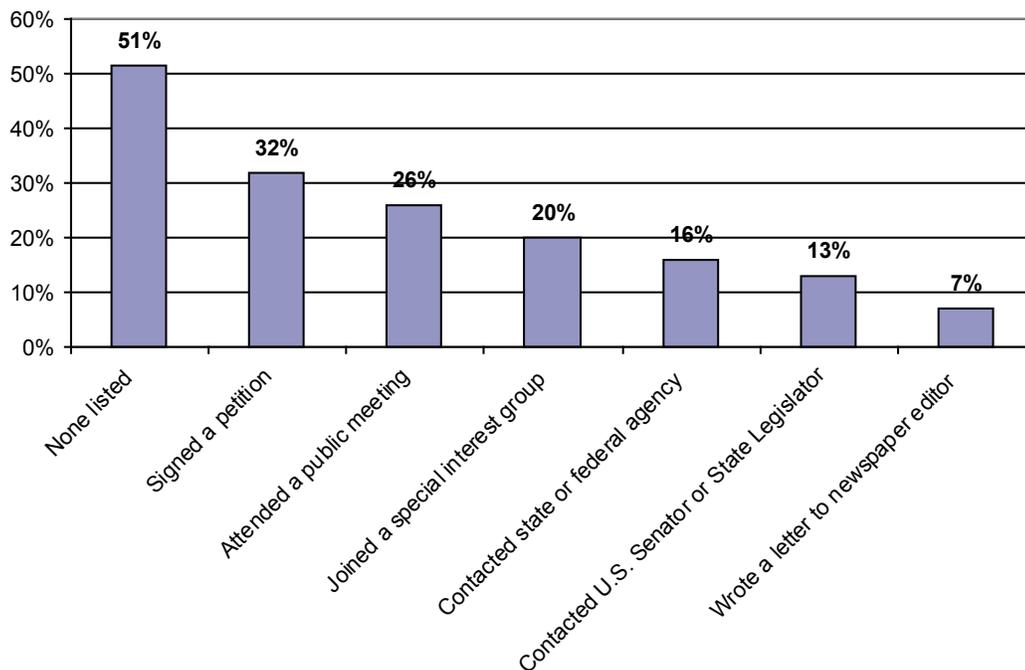


Figure G.3. Rappahannock River Valley residents' participation in natural resource decisionmaking.

Civic Engagement in Natural Resource Decisionmaking

Community residents have had limited involvement in natural resource issues over the past 5 years (Figure G.3), with only 50 percent of residents engaging in at least one of the activities listed. Of those, the average number of activities was 1.5.

Familiarity with and Confidence in Natural Resource Organizations

Community residents are not very familiar with entities involved in natural resource management along the Rappahannock River, but do have confidence in them. People were most familiar with the county government, but this was also the managing agency in which they had the least amount of confidence. Residents rated other organizations positively, including nonprofit conservation groups, state agencies, farm advocacy groups and Rappahannock River Valley NWR, in terms of their level of confidence.

While not particularly familiar with the Refuge, people were aware of it to some extent. About half of the residents surveyed were aware of the Refuge before receiving the survey. More hunters (especially waterfowl hunters) than nonhunters were aware of the Refuge. Among nonhunters, however, people who participated in bank fishing, self-guided wildlife viewing, and bird watching were more likely to be familiar with the Refuge. Those people who are more aware of the Refuge are more familiar with all organizations involved with natural resource issues along the Rappahannock River and had more confidence in the Refuge. People who had participated in natural resource decisionmaking (e.g., signed a petition, attended a public meeting, etc.) were also more aware of the Refuge.

Community Understanding of the Refuge

An important component of this survey was to understand community resident knowledge of Refuge issues. Generally, people indicated that they knew “very little” about Rappahannock River Valley NWR and its management. The average number of correct answers to all of the questions asked to test knowledge confirms this claim. However, most people did know that the establishing purpose of the Refuge was to protect migratory birds, wetlands, and endangered species. Most also knew that the primary purpose of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to protect and improve fish and wildlife and their habitats. They were also aware that condemnation is not a policy for obtaining land, but one in seven was not aware that full title purchase of available property from willing sellers is an option. Most people knew that photography and fishing are permitted on Refuge lands and that dogs off leash are not (Figure G.4). Only about a third knew that hunting is permitted on the Refuge. There was some confusion as to whether collecting items such as artifacts, plants, or insects, beach use, horseback riding, camping, or picnicking are allowed on the Refuge, none of which are permitted.

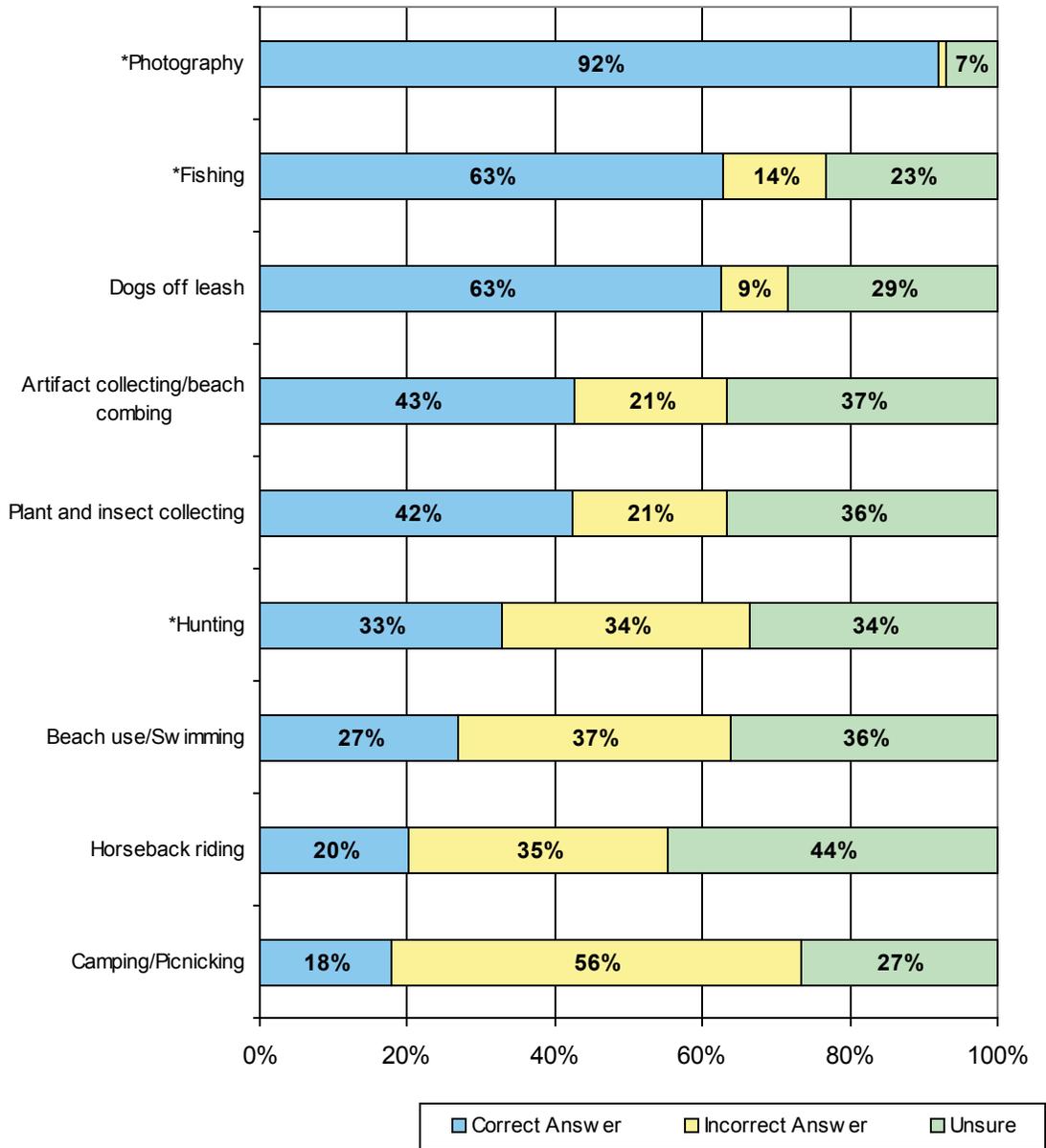


Figure G.4. Rappahannock River Valley respondents’ knowledge of permitted activities on the Rappahannock NWR. Asterisk indicates activities that are allowed on the Refuge.

Preferences for Future Services and Willingness to Pay Fees

Residents were asked about the desirability of future services and facilities on the Refuge. Educational information on historic sites, fishing opportunities, access for people with disabilities, viewing areas with information about wildlife habitats, restrooms, and a website with information about the Refuge and its activities were ranked as most desirable by the most respondents (Figure G.5). While on average hunting opportunities were not rated desirable, when hunters were separated from nonhunters, these activities were rated as the most desirable.

When asked about willingness to pay a fee for services offered by Rappahannock River Valley NWR, 42 percent indicated that they should not have to pay a fee to visit this or any refuge. However, the majority of respondents were willing to pay a fee for educational programs, special events, and maintenance of the facilities they use. People who knew more about the Refuge and those who rated nonconsumptive services and activities as desirable tended to be more willing to pay a fee for services.

Preferences for Management of Refuge Lands

In order to understand community preferences for management of current and future Refuge lands, six hypothetical scenarios were created based on these important considerations for Refuge land management:

- access for hunting and fishing opportunities,
- access for wildlife observation opportunities,
- opportunities for development along rivers and creeks,
- plantings in fields or crops under the control of the Refuge,
- the look of the overall Refuge landscape, and
- the options for acquisition of available land (within the Refuge acquisition boundary).

These scenarios were designed to allow residents to plainly see the tradeoffs inherent in each situation. By doing so, the factors most important to residents could be determined. Residents were asked to rate the acceptability (or unacceptability) of each of the scenarios.

Most of the scenarios were deemed acceptable. The only scenario rated as unacceptable involved an increase in development opportunities. The most acceptable scenarios involved the Refuge acquiring available land, although the distinction between acquisition through full ownership rights or conservation easements did not appear to make a difference in acceptability rating. These scenarios also involved an increase in access for wildlife viewing opportunities and a decrease in development opportunities along rivers and streams.

Overall, community members do not appear to be in favor of increased development along rivers and streams, and are supportive of having Rappahannock River Valley NWR acquire available land. They also feel positively about wildlife observation, as they are more accepting of situations that involve an increase in access for this opportunity as opposed to having access remain at current levels. This is in keeping with other survey results that indicate that residents find self-guided nature/wildlife viewing and bird watching important and find viewing areas with information about wildlife and habitats desirable. The look of the fields and surrounding landscape seemed to be less important to residents than the assurance that development opportunities decrease, the Refuge acquire land, and wildlife observation opportunities increase.

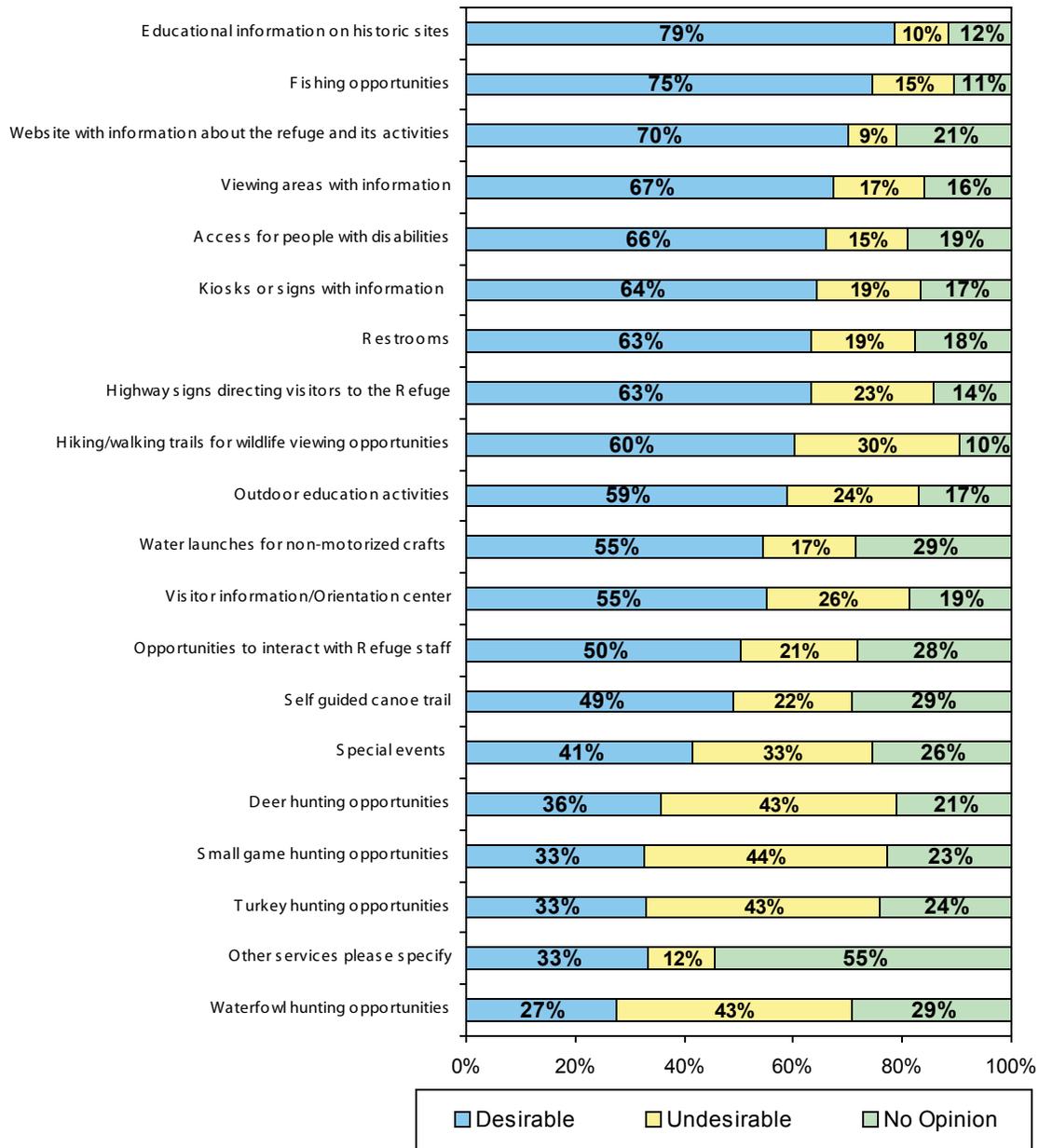


Figure G.5. Resident desirability of future services or facilities on Rappahannock River Valley NWR

In Summary

The results from this study will inform the staff and management team at Rappahannock River Valley NWR about preferences of community members and, consequently, prospective future visitors. This will enable them to form their future management schemes with the community voice in mind. This knowledge will aid them in management decisions as well as communication with their neighboring communities.