

Kissimmee Chain of Lakes Long Term Management Plan

Stakeholder Survey Evaluation

Bridgett Tolley

Sr. Community Outreach/Media Specialist

South Florida Water Management District, Orlando Service Center

407-858-6100, extension 3806

Abstract

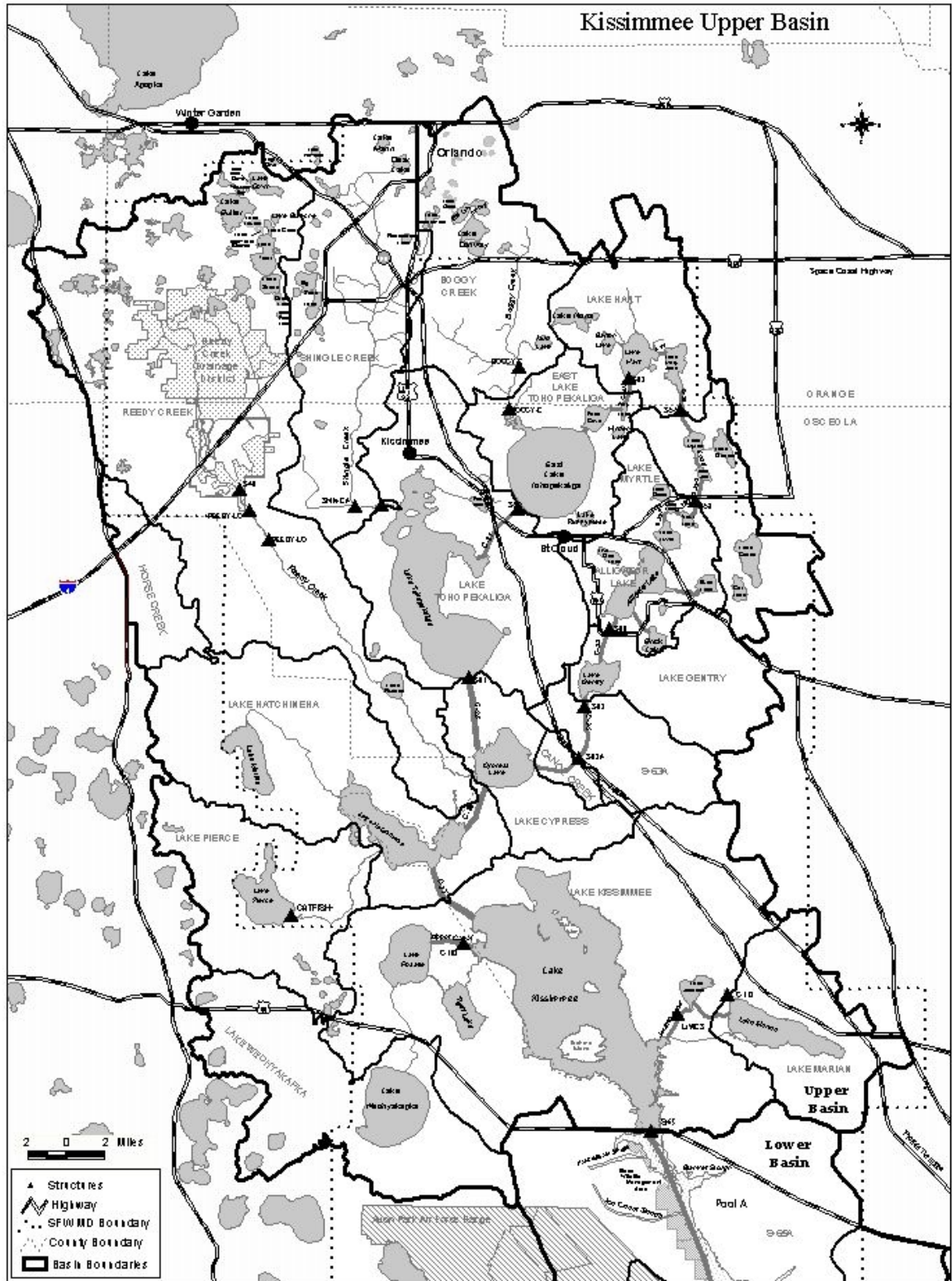
A survey was conducted to assess the values residents and visitors in Osceola, Polk, Highlands and Okeechobee counties associate with the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. Results showed that a significant number of people use the lakes and associated uplands for leisure time activities and that protecting water quality is a high priority relative to their continued enjoyment of these activities. In addition, results showed that fish and wildlife habitat preservation was thought to be a higher priority than recreation and access to areas for recreation, suggesting that respondents of the survey place an intrinsic value rather than a utilitarian value on the environment. The survey revealed that activities associated with agency management responsibilities are not widely known, which reinforces the need for continued public outreach. The survey revealed no clear indication of media preference for receiving environmental information, but this does not suggest a lack of interest. Slightly over half of the respondents wanted more information about the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes Long-Term Management Plan (KCOL LTMP) and provided contact information.

KCOL LTMP Survey Background

The Kissimmee Basin covers approximately 2,300 square miles of south-central Florida and is the largest area draining to Lake Okeechobee. The basin includes the Kissimmee Upper Basin (KUB), located in the northern half of the watershed, and the Lower Kissimmee Basin (LKB), located south of Lake Kissimmee. The KUB is comprised of numerous lakes that were historically connected by streams and sloughs. The LKB includes the Kissimmee River, its floodplain, and the tributaries draining into the river.

The Kissimmee Chain of Lakes provides a variety of economic, recreational and aesthetic benefits including world-class bass fishing and wildlife viewing. These lakes are part of the Central and Southern Florida (C&SF) Project that was authorized by Congress in the 1950s to provide flood protection for the region. In addition, the lakes and associated wetlands provide a variety of environmental services including habitat for fish and wildlife and nutrient removal. The KCOL LTMP was initiated by the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) in 2003 to address concerns with lake management practices. Specifically, those practices with the potential to produce positive benefits in one area while, at the same time, conflicting with practices needed to produce desired outcomes in other areas.

KCOL LTMP Location Map



\\fs1-811\B_b\usercache\wzpr\kub\imp_b-w_8x11_2004.apr

\\fs1-811\B_b\usercache\wzpr\kub\imp_b-w_8x11_2004.apr

Over the next two years, the SFWMD working in partnership with federal, state, and local agencies will strive to build consensus on what is valued about the Chain of Lakes system and what should be preserved and protected through interagency management practices. The goals that are viewed as important to improving and sustaining the health and values of this system include:

- Hydrologic management
- Habitat preservation and enhancement
- Aquatic plant management
- Water quality improvement
- Recreation and public use

The partners in this effort are:

South Florida Water Management District
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Florida Department of Environmental Protection
Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Local Governments and Community Leaders
Other stakeholders

To determine what is valued about the Chain of Lakes system, an outreach sub-committee met in June 2004 to discuss the goals of the KCOL LTMP and to determine how to assess stakeholder values about the system.

Methodology

The outreach sub-committee identified 7 stakeholder groups to survey within the four counties (Osceola, Polk, Highlands and Okeechobee) encompassing the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes. The target population in these four counties is 844,860 people, requiring 387 completed surveys to achieve a 95% confidence level with a $\pm 5\%$ confidence interval. The survey results are based on 394 completed surveys.

Surveys were taken on a voluntary basis by 228 individuals attending nine community events during the timeframe beginning October 2004 and ending February 28, 2005. Additionally, 166 surveys were returned out of 743 surveys mailed. The mailing list was generated through the South Florida Water Management District's (SFWMD) various stakeholder mailing lists. Because the sample was not random, the findings cannot be translated into conclusive generalizations.

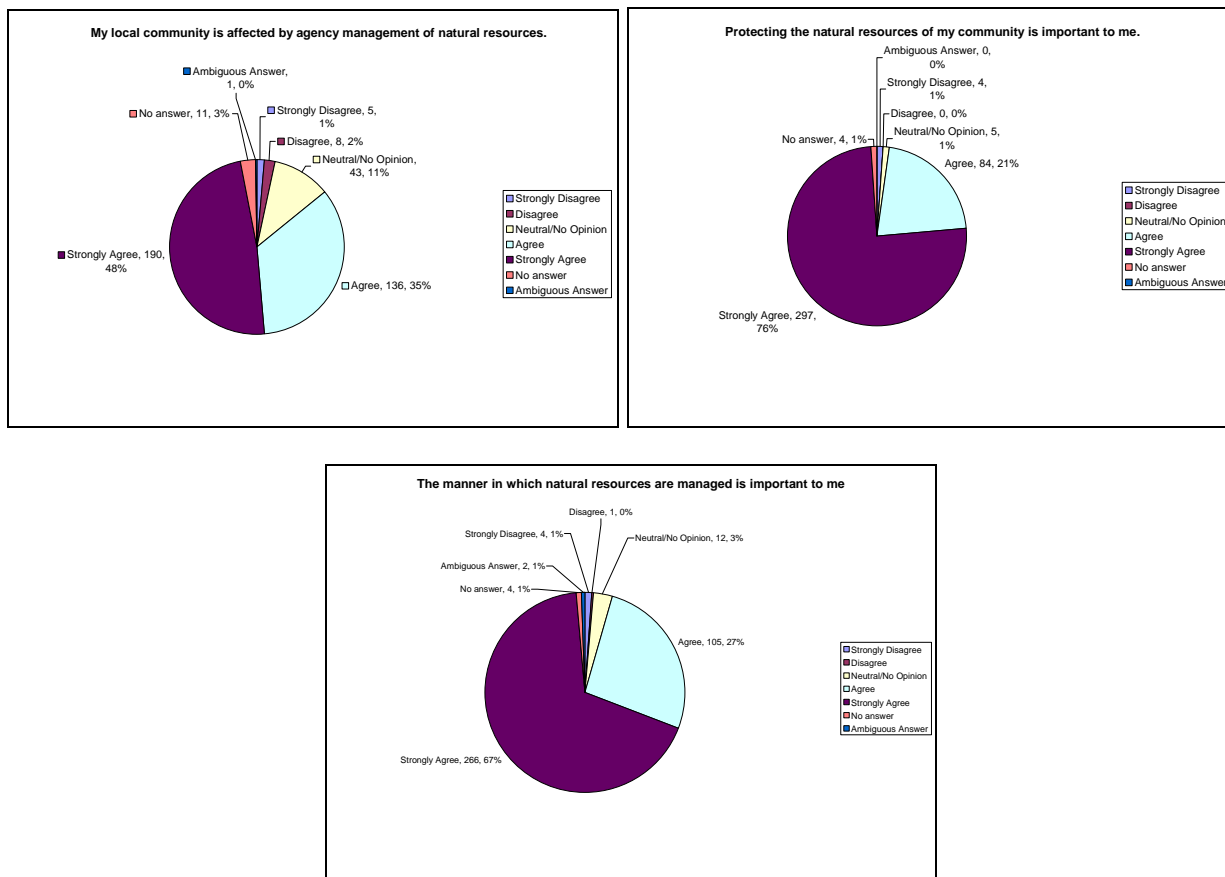
The first section of the survey tried to assess what respondents knew or thought about natural resource management practices. The second section of the survey asked the

respondents to categorize themselves into one of the seven stakeholder groups, and further identify themselves within the stakeholder group. The respondent was able to identify with multiple stakeholder groups. The third section of the survey asked the respondents to choose from a list of lakes that they have visited and what types of activities they have participated in. Within this section, the respondents were asked to rate water quality, aquatic plant/weed management, public access, recreation, habitat preservation and fish and wildlife in terms of high, medium or low priority. These aspects were rated individually, and were not ranked against each other. The fourth section of the survey asked respondents about their involvement in environmental issues, their media preference and whether they would like to be contacted in the future about the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes Long Term Management Plan.

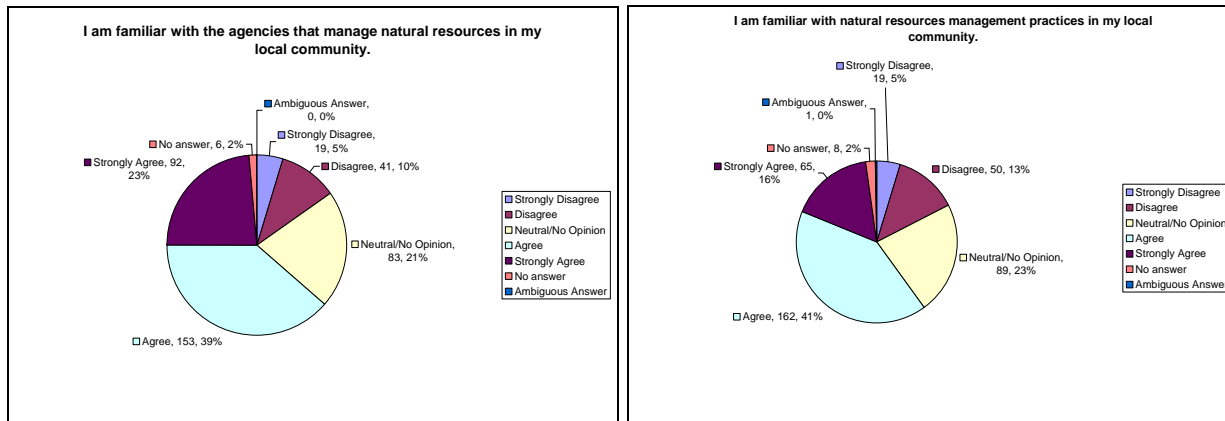
Survey Results

Section 1 - Natural Resources Management Practices

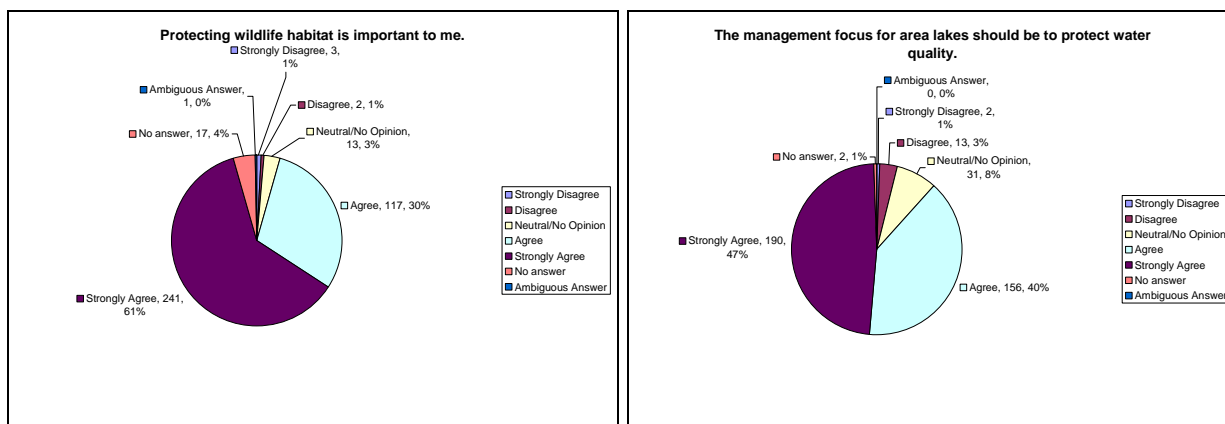
Relative to what respondents knew about natural resource management practices, 83% (those respondents who strongly agree and agree) said that their local community was affected by agency management of natural resources. Ninety-seven percent said that protecting the natural resources of their community is important to them and 94% said that the manner in which natural resources are managed is important to them.



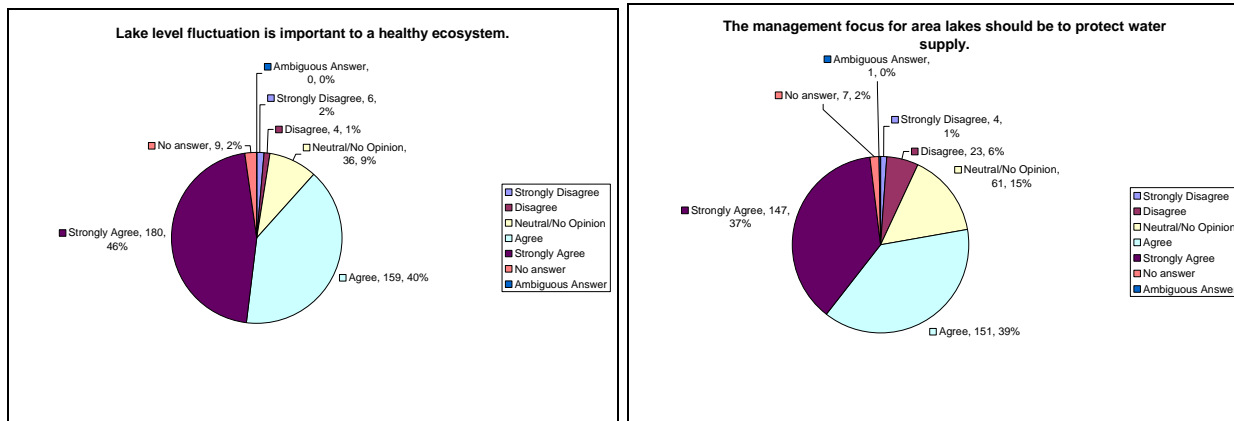
What is significant from an agency public outreach perspective is that only 62% of respondents said they were familiar with the agencies that manage natural resources in their local community and even fewer (57%) said they were familiar with natural resources management practices in their local community.



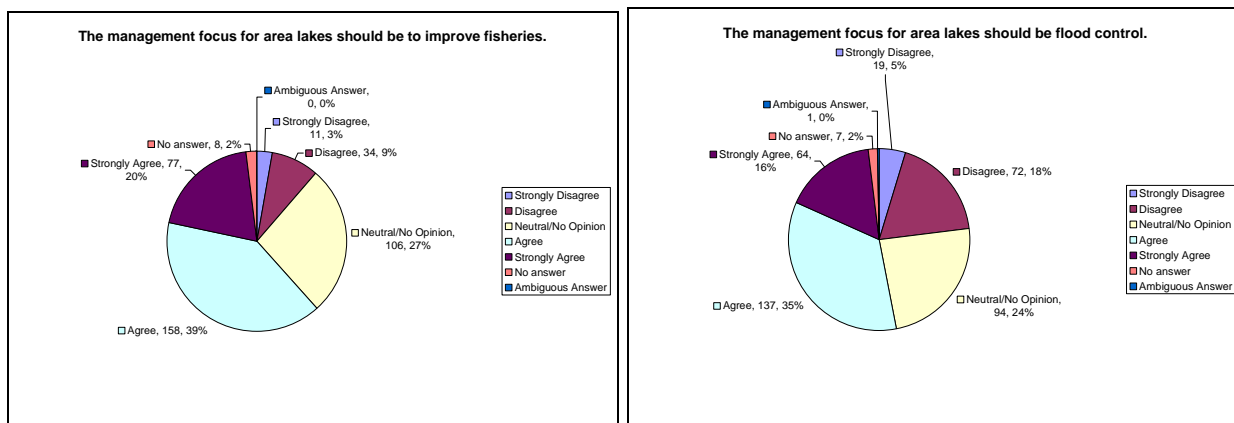
Ninety-one percent of respondents said that protecting wildlife habitat was important to them. In terms of agency management of area lakes, a majority (87%) of respondents said that protecting water quality should be the management focus.



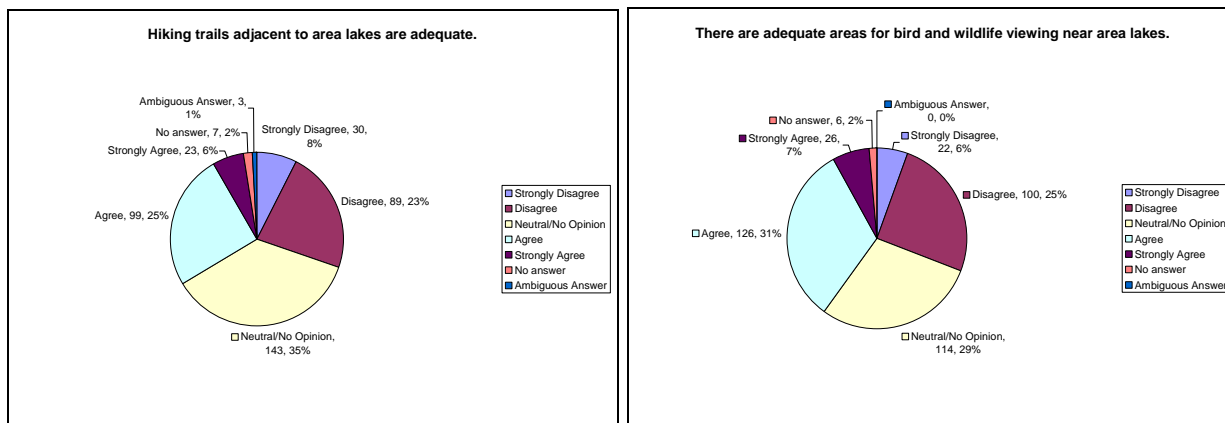
Eighty-six percent of respondents said that lake level fluctuation is important to a healthy ecosystem. Seventy-six percent of respondents said that protecting water supply should be the management focus. The survey did not specify agricultural, public or environmental water supply.



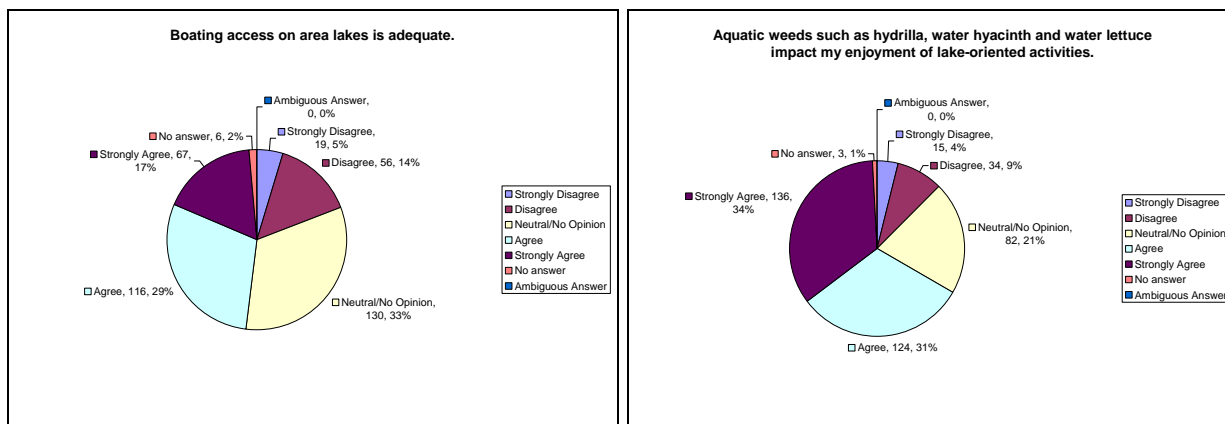
While a slight majority of respondents thought agency management should focus on improving fisheries (59%), a large number of respondents (29%) had no opinion about this statement or did not answer the question, and 12% disagreed (either disagreed or strongly disagreed) with it. Likewise, 51% of respondents said that the management focus should be flood protection, 23% disagreed, 24% had no opinion and 2% did not answer the question.



As many people agreed (31%) as disagreed (31%) that hiking trails were adequate with 35% responding that they were neutral about this issue. Adequate areas for bird and wildlife viewing were similarly divided with 38% of respondents agreeing that there were adequate areas for this purpose, 31% disagreeing that there were adequate areas and 29% stating they were neutral on this issue.



Forty-six percent of those surveyed thought that boating access was adequate, but only 19% disagreed with this assertion. Sixty-five percent of respondents reported that aquatic weeds impacted their enjoyment of lake-oriented activities.



Section 2 - Stakeholder Groups

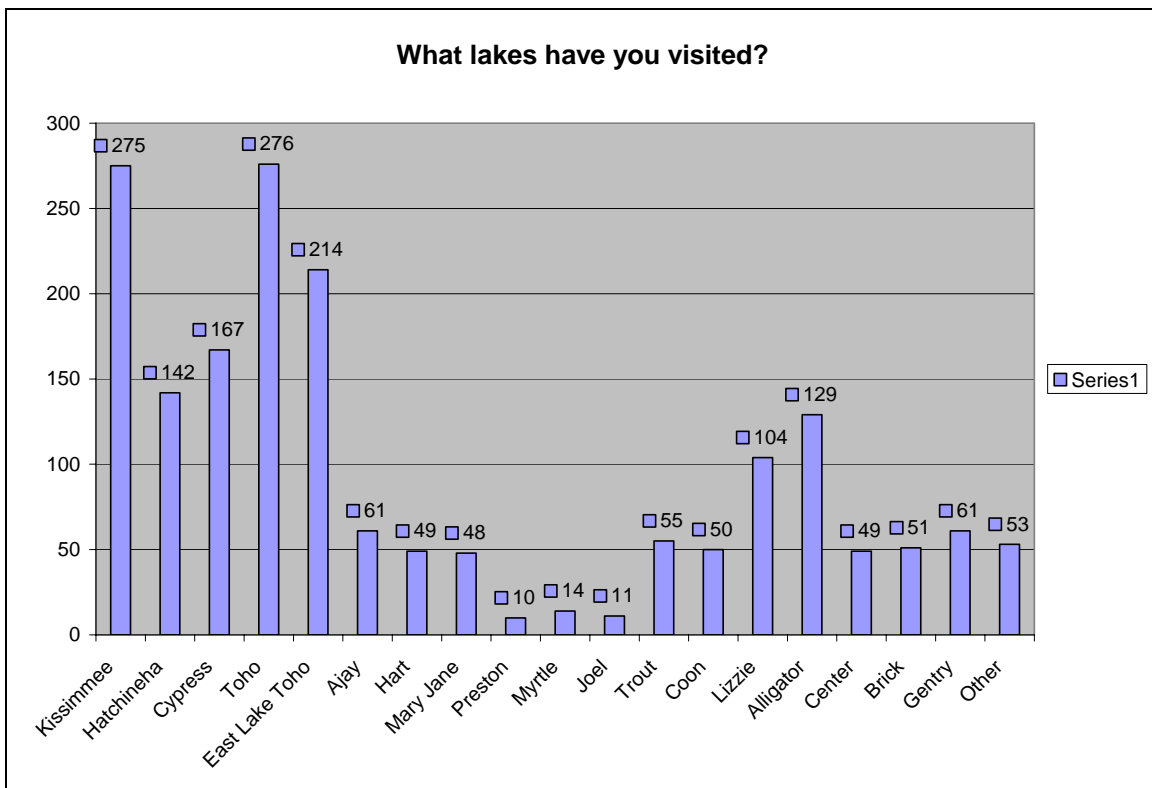
The target audience for the survey was people living in or visiting the Osceola, Polk, Highlands or Okeechobee county area. Seventy-four percent of respondents identified themselves as full time residents of Osceola, Polk, Highlands or Okeechobee counties.

The seven stakeholder groups that the outreach team identified as being important to target are listed below as well as the number of respondents who identified themselves as such. Respondents could identify with more than one stakeholder group, thus the high number of responses within the non-consumptive recreational users group.

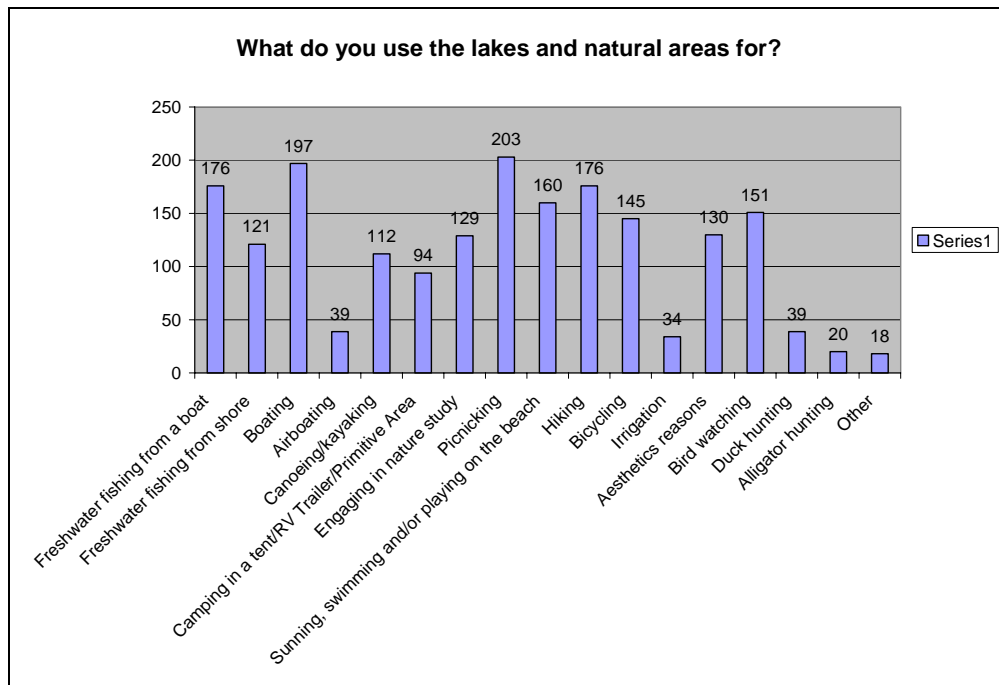
1. Homeowners/Residents - 290
2. Business/Tourism Interests - 164
3. Developers/Planners -149
4. Agricultural Interests - 93
5. Consumptive Recreational Users - 292
6. Non-consumptive Recreational Users - 1412
7. Environmental Groups – 197

Section 3 - Activities

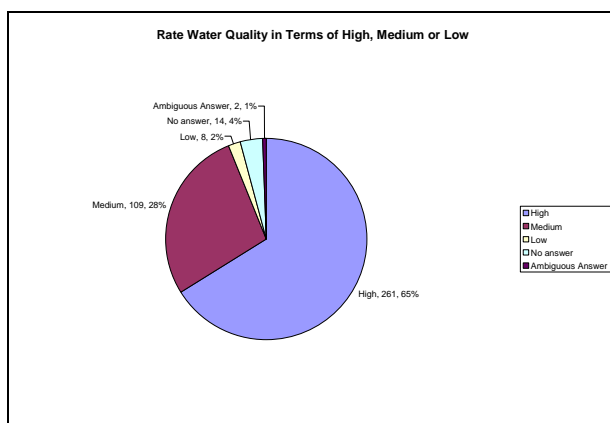
In this section, respondents were asked to identify what lakes associated with the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes they have visited. Most respondents (276) said Lake Tohopekaliga, followed by 275 who said Lake Kissimmee, and then East Lake Tohopekaliga with 214. The following chart summarized all of the responses.



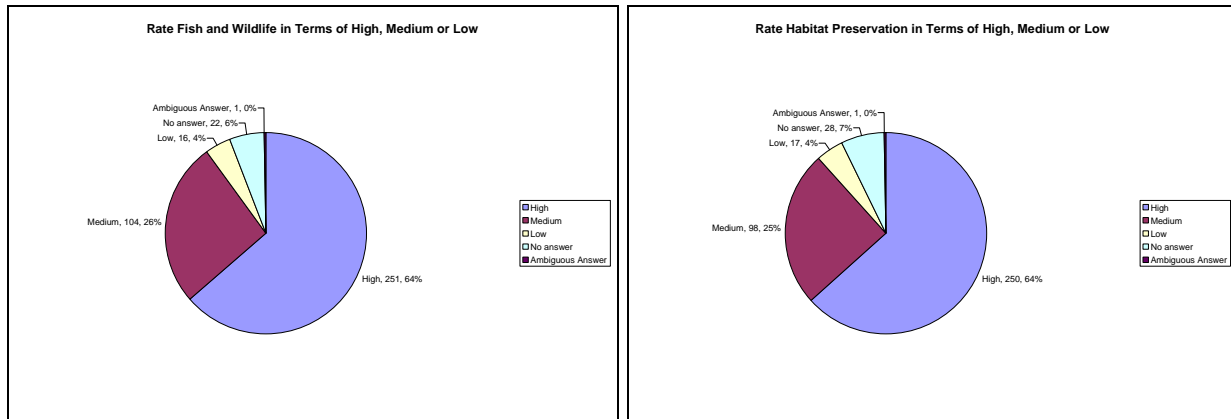
When asked what respondents used the lakes and adjacent areas for, the highest response was picnicking (203), followed by boating (197), then the same number of responses for freshwater fishing from a boat and hiking (176). The following chart summarizes all of the responses.



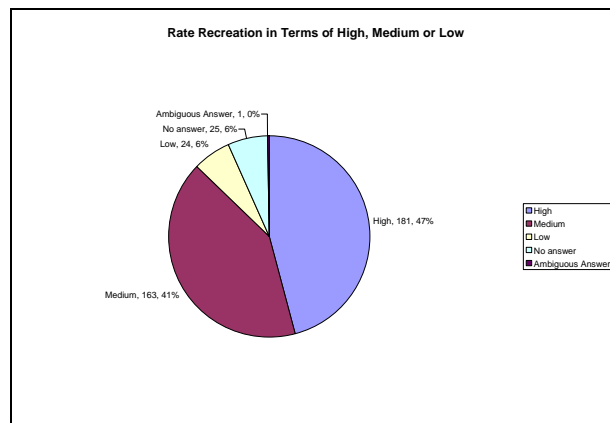
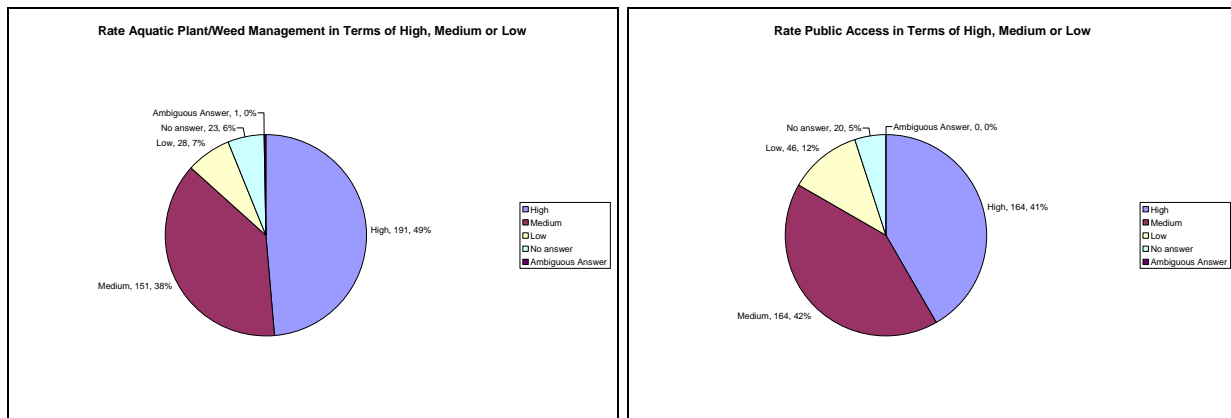
In this section of the survey, respondents were also asked to rate various aspects in terms of high, medium or low priority. When asked, the majority of respondents (65%) rated water quality as a high priority.



The majority of respondents (64%) rated fish and wildlife as a high priority and a majority (64%) rated habitat preservation as a high priority.

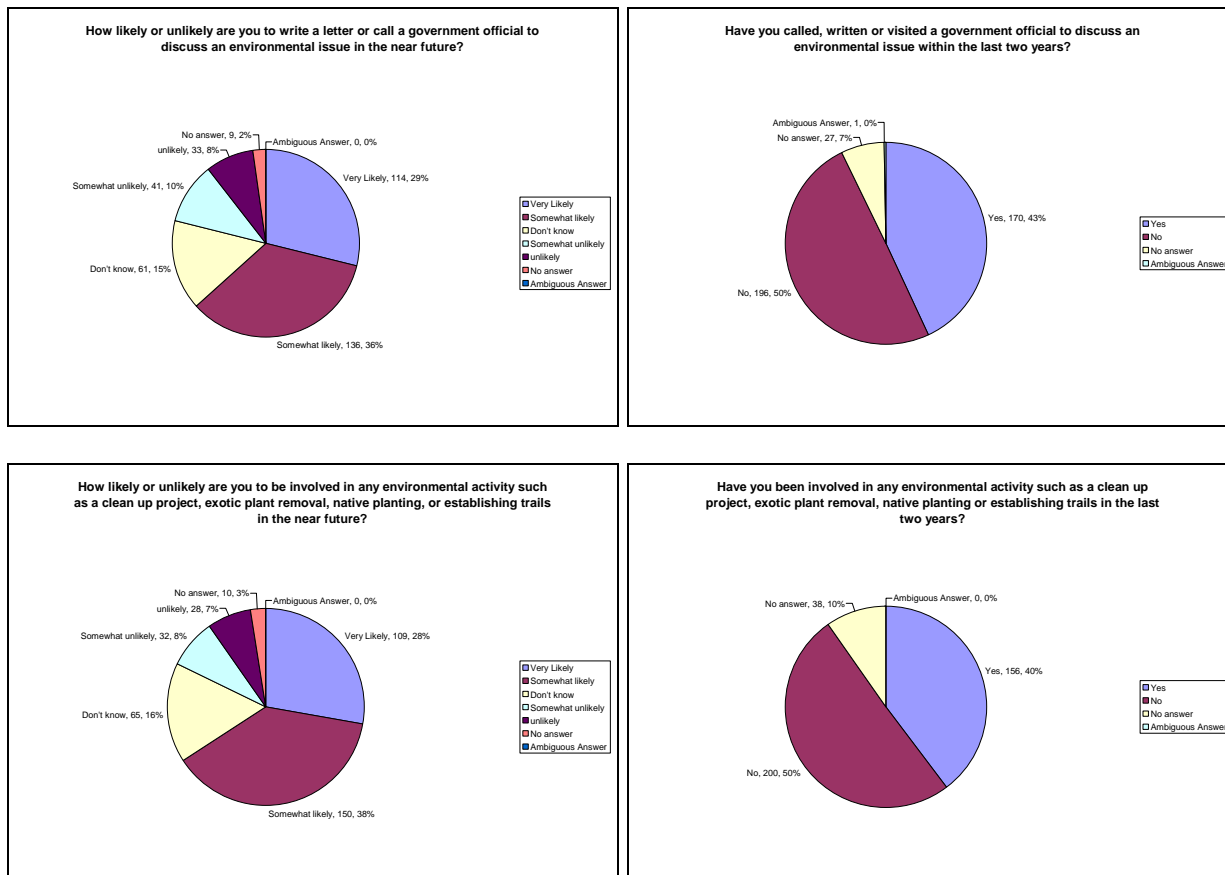


Aquatic plant management was rated as high by only 49% of respondents, with 38% rating it as a medium priority. Similarly, public access was rated as a high priority by only 41% of respondents, with 42% rating it as a medium priority. Finally, 47% of respondents rated recreation as a high priority, with 41% rating it as a medium priority.



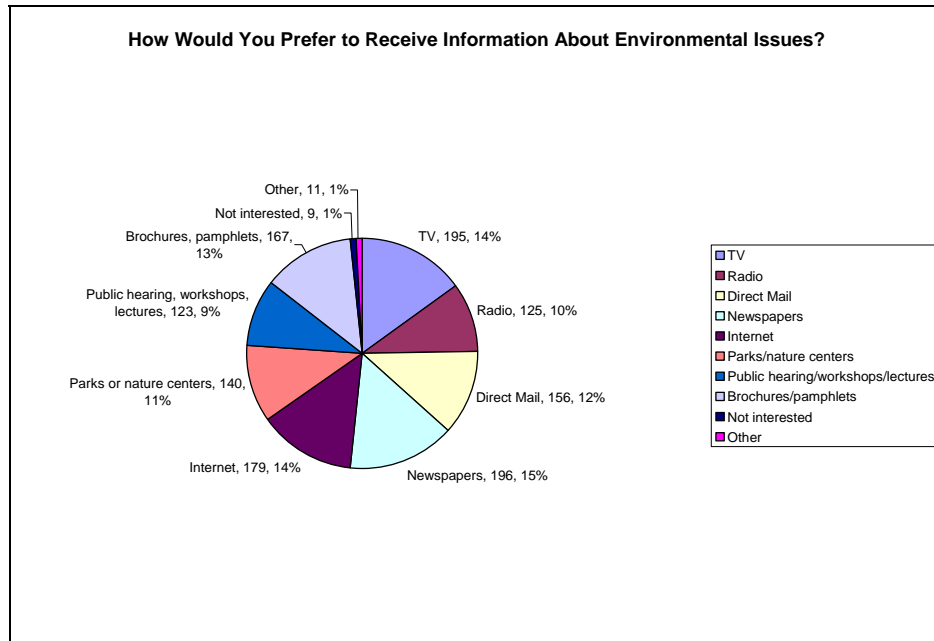
Section 4 – Current involvement in environmental issues

In this section, respondents were asked how likely they were to get involved in an environmental activity and if they have actually done so. Sixty-five percent of those surveyed said they were likely or very likely to write a letter or call a government official to discuss an environmental issue whereas, only 43% had actually done so in the past two years. Similarly, 66% said they were likely or very likely to be involved in an environmental activity such as a clean-up project, but only 40% had actually done so in the past two years.



In terms of future interest in the KCOL LTMP, 201 respondents (51%) said they wanted to be contacted about future lake-related agency meetings. This information will be used to update the database for future KCOL LTMP public meetings.

Relative to how respondents want to receive information about environmental issues, the eight choices given were more or less equally rated (see chart below).



Further survey analysis will be conducted to determine if there is a trend by stakeholder group relative to media preference.

Conclusions

Most survey respondents agreed that protecting the natural resources of the community was important to them (97%, page 4), but the number drops significantly when asked if they are familiar with the agencies that manage natural resources (62%, page 5) and what those natural resource management activities are (57%, page 5). This reveals that there may be an opportunity to better inform the public about the agencies involved with the KCOL LTMP and their areas of responsibility.

In terms of agency focus, most survey respondents agreed that water quality (87%, page 5) should be the focus of management agencies. Water quality was also an aspect that was rated as a high priority by a significant majority of respondents (65%, page 9). This information, coupled with the high number of non-consumptive recreational uses in the top 5 lake uses suggests that most people care a great deal about places where they can readily experience and enjoy nature. The top five recreational uses were:

1. Picnicking
2. Boating
3. Hiking and freshwater fishing from a boat (tie)
4. Sunning, swimming, playing on the beach
5. Bird watching

Seventy-six percent of respondents said that water supply should be the focus of agency management (page 6). There may be two interpretations for this number. First, there have been consistent media reports over time that water supply in Central Florida has become a critical growth and development issue and this may be reflected in the responses. Secondly, the response may reflect a perception that our water supply comes from surface rather than groundwater, thus revealing another opportunity for public awareness of water supply.

The results of this survey and analysis will guide the development of two brochures for the KCOL LTMP. One brochure will be a fairly inexpensive, easy-to-produce double-sided sheet which can be updated periodically with the latest developments that come as a result of the progress of the KCOL LTMP.

The other will be a brochure with a longer shelf life. In addition to information about the KCOL LTMP, perhaps this brochure can give an overview of management practices and list the agencies responsible for those practices. Given the high number of responses to questions about water quality and non-consumptive recreational uses, it is suggested that people may respond favorably to a brochure that depicts nature, natural areas, and passive recreational activities.