

WHERE IS DEMAND FOR SPORTFISHING THE GREATEST?

IOWA'S REPORT



This Project was funded by a Multistate Conservation Grant (F25AP00181-00) from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and jointly administered with the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.



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IOWA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

In a continuous cycle, some people take up fishing while others quit. Simultaneously, people move from place to place, transforming communities in the process. As these changes occur, demand for sportfishing access also shifts across communities. Insight from this research will provide state R3 programs and their partners a valuable tool to find potential new anglers, reactivate lapsed anglers, identify convenient access points, and initiate marketing campaigns that focus on those areas and type of anglers.

Identifying areas where **unmet fishing demand is currently greatest** and **access points are most needed**, while also **characterizing communities** where anglers live to provide geographically specific marketing strategies uses three key approaches:

- **Resident angler license purchase data:** Fishing license sales of any type from 2015 through 2024 were provided and explored in two ways. The first, through a 10-year and 5-year customer look-back period. The second, through an R3-based purchase/demographic profile, with additional details provided on the next slide. All customers who met the study's age requirement, holding any type of licenses, from one-day to annual, were considered.
- **Mapping and Tapestry™ lifestyle data:** To gain a spatial perspective about purchase profiles, the address data from a representative sample of the license records were mapped using ArcGIS tools available through ESRI and each address was assigned a Tapestry™ lifestyle segment. ESRI's Tapestry Segmentation identifies 67 distinctive markets in the US based on socioeconomic and demographic characteristics to provide an accurate, comprehensive profile of communities.
- **Waterbody locations and access:** To explore what angler access and fishing opportunities exist within the state, another layer of information was added to the maps: mapped waterbodies from the U.S. Geological Survey. By using this data in combination with the state's fish & wildlife agency's fishing information, it was possible to investigate how fishing opportunity might align with angler population density.



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APPROACH: ANGLER LICENSE DATA & R3 CATEOGRY

The ten-year purchase history data enabled an exploration of the angling population within the state beyond a simple license holder distribution. Each license holder was categorized in a way that aligned with R3 efforts and placed into one of three categories based on their license purchase history during the last decade. Results specific to R3 categories are reflective of a random sample of 120,000 anglers, split evenly amongst the three categories.

Angler R3 Categories	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
New (Recruit)	No purchases								At least 1 purchase	
Steady (Retain)	At least 2 purchases					At least 1 purchase			At least 1 purchase	
Lapsed (Reactivate)	No purchases			No more than 2 purchases					No purchases	
	At least 5 purchases								No purchases	

Notes:

- Categories were designed to be mutually exclusive and conceptualized to develop actionable recommendations for state fish and wildlife agencies. As such, some anglers did not fall within a category, including many one-time license purchasers or anglers not requiring the purchase of a license due age restrictions (e.g., youth or seniors). Age restrictions were applied to ensure accurate classification: anglers in “New” category must be 21 or older to exclude first-time youth license buyers, while “Steady” and “Lapsed” anglers must be at least 25 years or older.
- The license data used for this study was collected from states, cleaned and processed so that the remaining data sample consisted of resident anglers who had purchased at least one fishing license during the 10-year timeframe. Missing data fields for personal identifying information resulted in a license holder being removed from the final sample.

Results are organized into three sections in this report:

- **Anglers by city:** License holder population distribution across the state
- **Anglers by R3 category:** Categorized license holder population distribution and characteristics by age, gender, urbanization, and Tapestry segment
- **Cedar Rapids Case Study:** License holder population distribution in the focal area and R3 category by Tapestry segment

A companion workbook with detailed tables is also provided separately.

RESULTS: ANGLERS BY CITY

Iowa has experienced geographical shifts in its angler population along the urban-rural continuum over the past decade, with an increasing share of licensed anglers residing in metropolitan core areas and declining numbers of anglers living in metropolitan commuting and rural areas. Slightly less than 1/3rds of anglers live in metropolitan core and 1/4th live in rural areas, despite its recent decline. Therefore, increasing access and awareness of fishing opportunities in both urban and rural areas could have an outsized effect on angler participation.

Urban-Rural Classification of Resident License Holder Address			
Urban-Rural	Percent of Angling Population (10-year average)	Angler Percent Change (2015 – 2024)	Angler Percent Change (2019 – 2024)
Metropolitan core	32.4%	8.0%	8.5%
Metropolitan commuting	12.9%	-7.9%	-6.9%
Micropolitan/Small cities/Suburbs	16.6%	1.3%	0.6%
Small Town	13.9%	-0.2%	-2.6%
Rural	24.2%	-6.6%	-6.0%

**To designate a location as metropolitan, micropolitan, and small town/rural, the latest processed census data from 2020 was leveraged and aggregated from ten categories to five for reporting purposes, Rural-Urban Commuting Area Codes - Documentation | Economic Research Service.*

RESULTS: ANGLERS BY CITY

Reflected in the table are the top ten cities with the largest proportion of licensed anglers in 2024. The highest percentage of anglers in the state are found in Des Moines and Cedar Rapids (column A). Naturally, these cities also hold more of the state's population generally (column D). Over the last five and ten years, angler numbers have significantly increased across all (column B and C).

City Name*	A Percent of all anglers in 2024	B Angler Percent Change (2015 - 2024)	C Angler Percent Change (2019 - 2024)	D Percent of Total Population (2024)	E Total Population Percent Change (2015-2024)**
Des Moines	5.0%	30.0%	19.7%	6.8%	2.1%
Cedar Rapids	3.6%	21.8%	10.6%	4.5%	6.7%
Davenport	2.4%	37.6%	35.9%	3.2%	-1.1%
Dubuque	2.1%	16.0%	16.5%	2.3%	1.6%
Council Bluffs	2.0%	21.8%	6.6%	2.2%	0.3%
Waterloo	1.9%	12.4%	3.0%	2.1%	-1.0%
Ankeny	1.7%	24.2%	3.2%	2.4%	37.7%
Sioux City	1.7%	18.0%	7.6%	2.8%	4.2%
Marion	1.2%	22.2%	8.1%	1.3%	10.4%
Muscatine	1.2%	17.6%	14.2%	0.9%	-3.3%

Note: To a certain extent the percent change in license holders reflects a variability in license records due to incomplete data for Personally Identifiable Information (PII) in earlier years. Additionally, percent changes may be exaggerated in cities with small angler populations, where even minor changes can produce large percentage shifts. Interpret results alongside each cities' overall share of anglers.

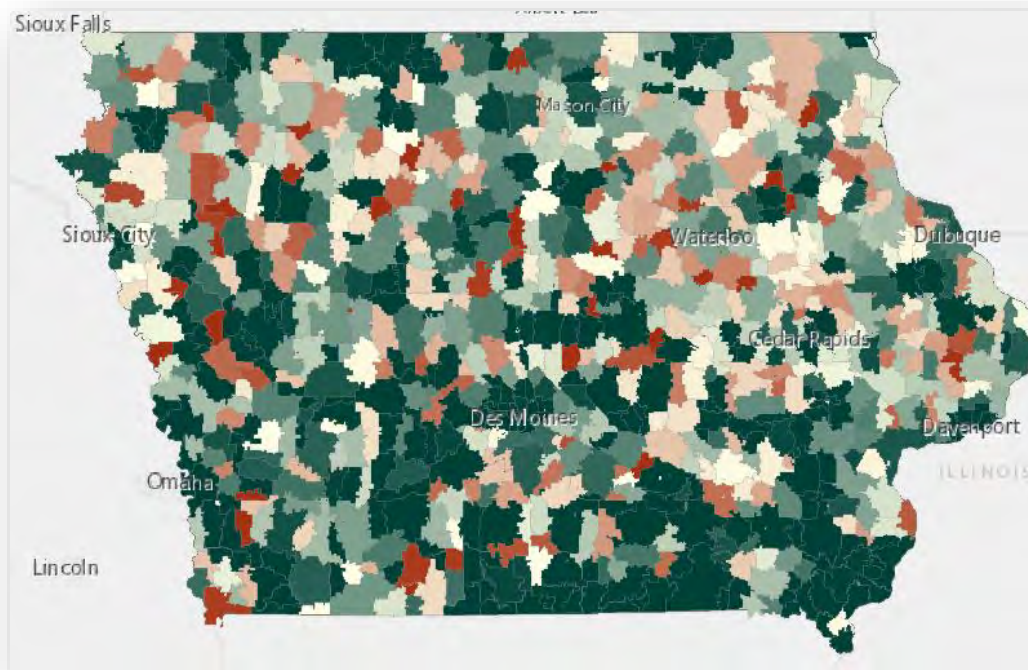
*Represents the top ten cities across the angling population in the state.

**Population data provided by the Census American Community Survey (ACS).

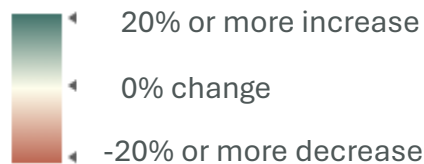
RESULTS: ANGLER CHANGE BY CITY

These two maps broaden the geographical scope. Over the last 10 years, the areas with the greatest percent increase in anglers are the large cities and areas along the Missouri and Illinois borders. In the last 5 years, however, we've seen angler declines in northern and western locations.

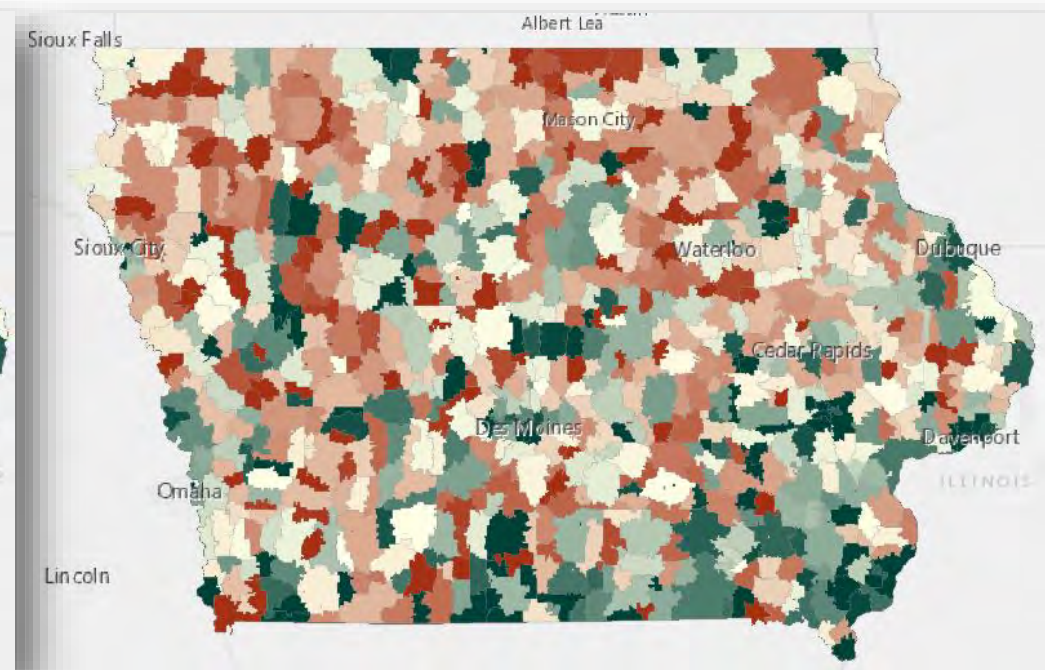
**Ten-year timeframe
(2015 through 2024)**



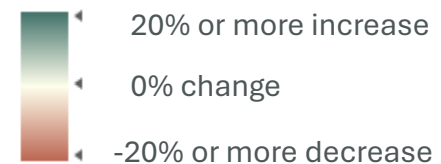
Percent change in the number of anglers by zip code from 2015-2024



**Five-year timeframe
(2019 through 2024)**



Percent change in the number of anglers by zip code from 2019-2024



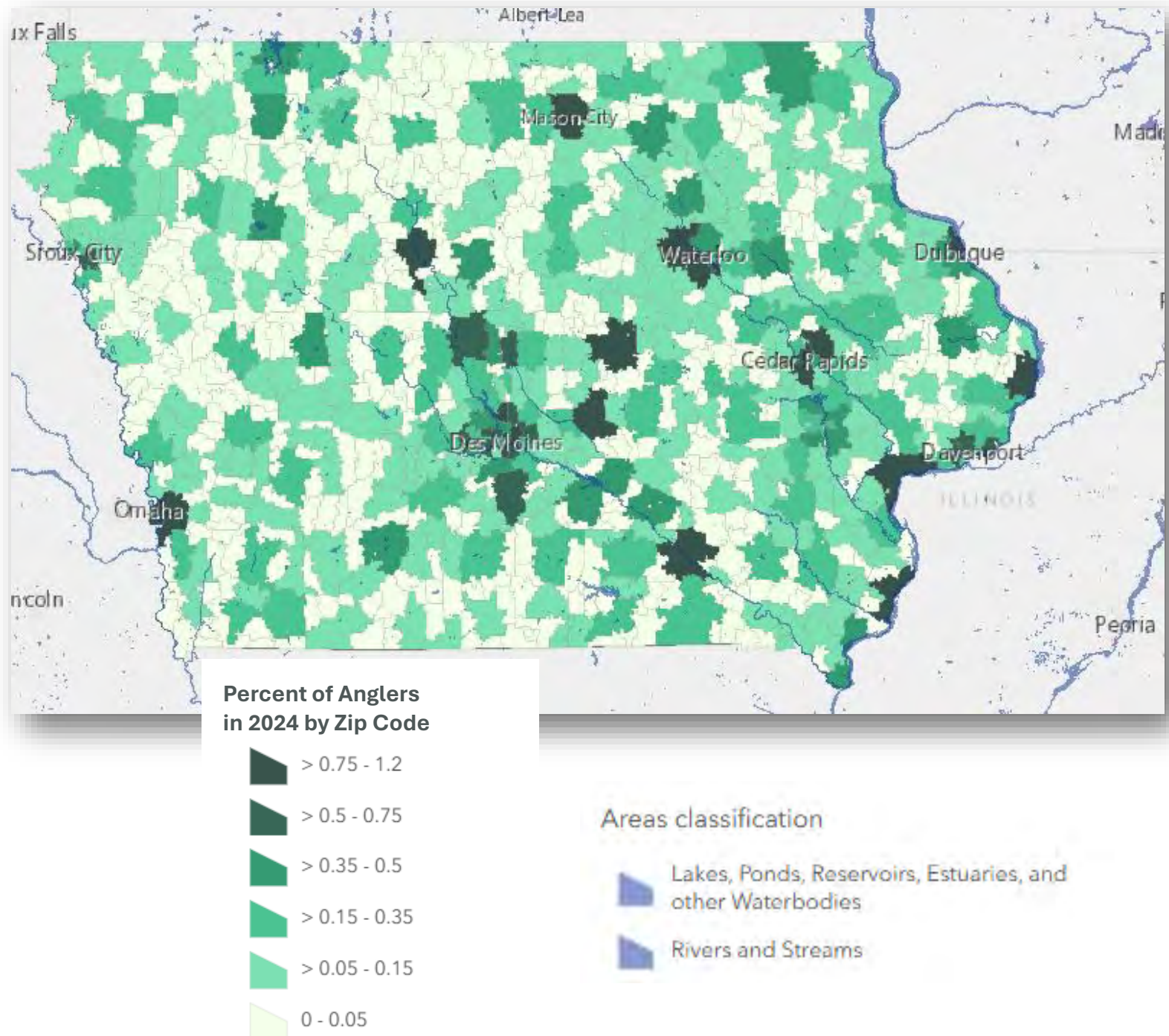
Note: To a certain extent the percent change in license holders reflects a variability in license records due to incomplete data for Personally Identifiable Information (PII) in earlier years.

RESULTS: ANGLERS & FISHING OPPORTUNITY

As expected, many anglers reside along river systems, major reservoirs, and metro areas.

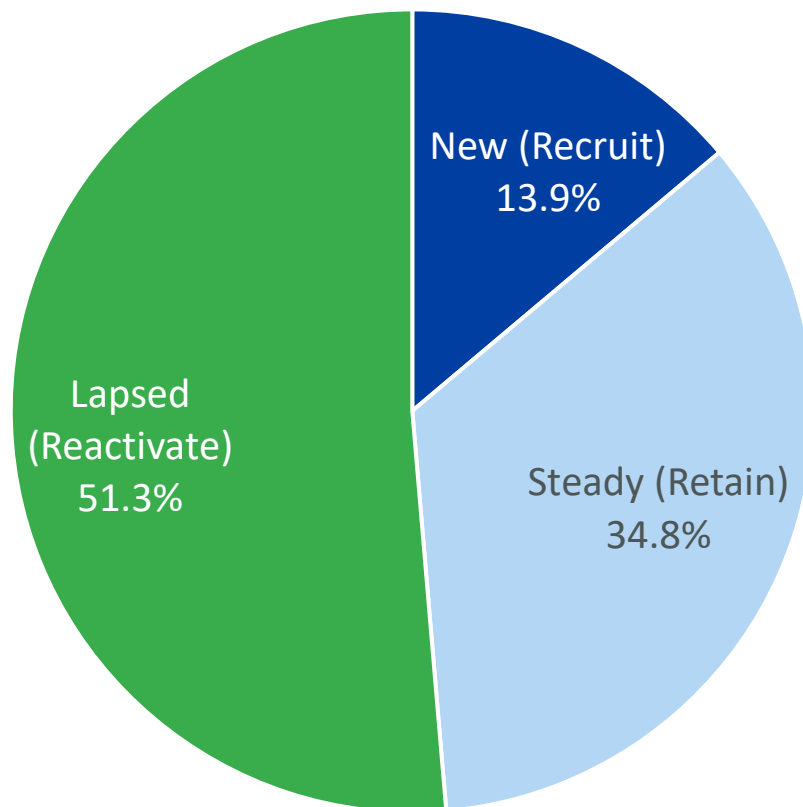
With population growth, comes an opportunity to create new anglers, or reactivate people who fished in their former hometowns. For these people, decision drivers may be lack of knowledge or awareness of the opportunity.

Iowa's Fish Local program is an excellent resource to identify and plan fishing trips throughout the state. Continuous improvement of this resource may help support the current and future angling community.



RESULTS: ANGLER R3 CATEGORY

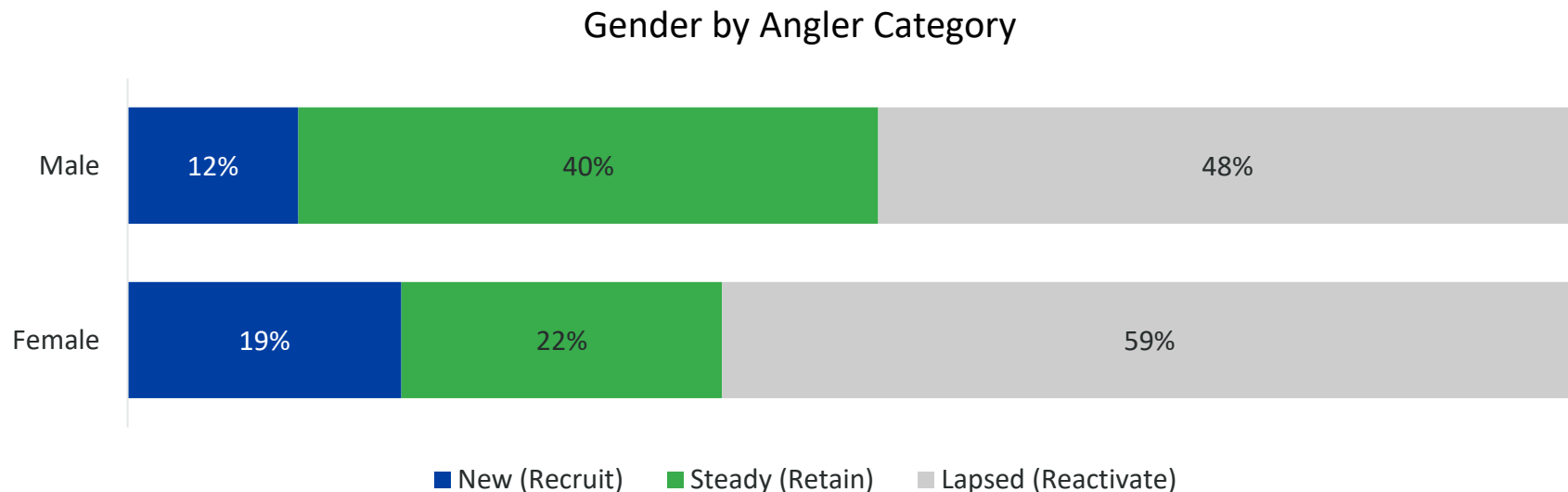
A total of 423,000 anglers were classified into one of the R3 three categories. One-third of Iowa's angler population is lapsed, meaning they didn't purchase a license in 2023 or 2024 despite having purchased in previous years. This represents a significant opportunity to re-engage with the angling population in the state. In the next pages, we'll explore the gender, age, urban-rural, and geographic specifics of these angler categories.



RESULTS: GENDER BY ANGLER R3 CATEGORY

Like many states, Iowa's angler population over the last decade is predominantly male, with men comprising roughly two and half times as many anglers. Female anglers are more likely than males to lapse. At the same time, in recent years females are entering fishing at a higher proportional rate than males, accounting for a larger share of new anglers.

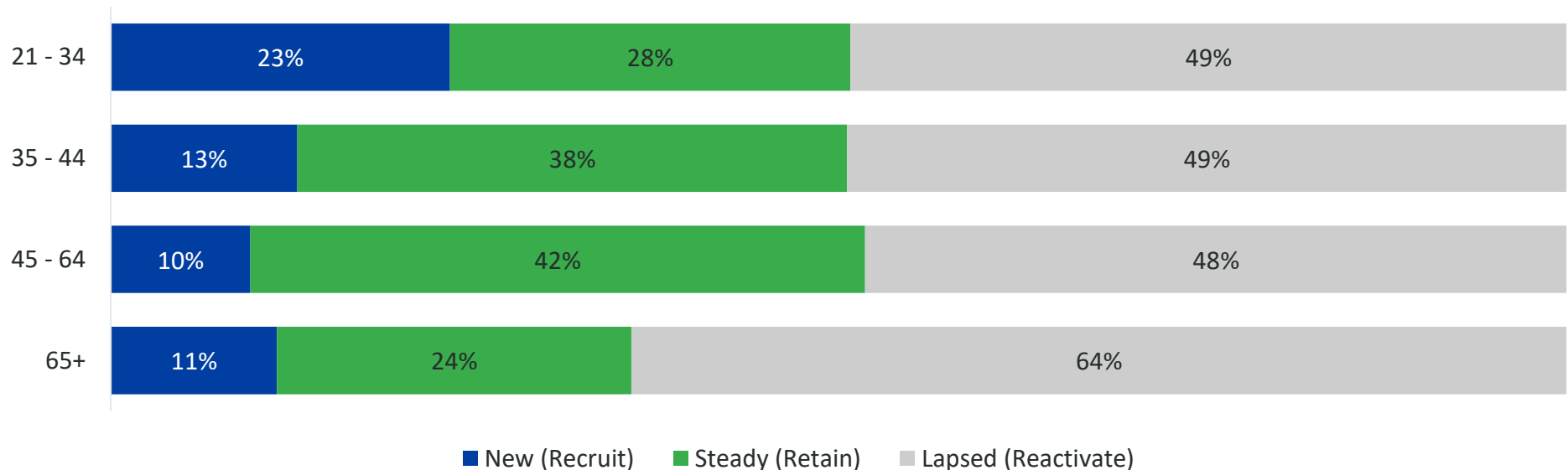
This pattern presents a R3 opportunity for Iowa. While recruitment of female anglers is gaining momentum, retention remains a critical challenge. Targeted strategies that reduce barriers and support early experiences, such as women-focused fishing programs and mentorship opportunities could significantly improve retention outcomes and strengthen long-term participation by keeping women on the water.



RESULTS: AGE BY ANGLER R3 CATEGORY

Most steady anglers are in the 45-64 age range; likely, this is because adults in this age range are no longer caretaking young children and they have more time available for recreation. Although Iowa offers a \$61.50 lifetime fishing license for people 65 and older, the highest percentage of lapsed anglers were from this age group. Consideration might be given to conducting a license price study to determine if cost is a barrier to participation among older anglers.

Age by Angler Category

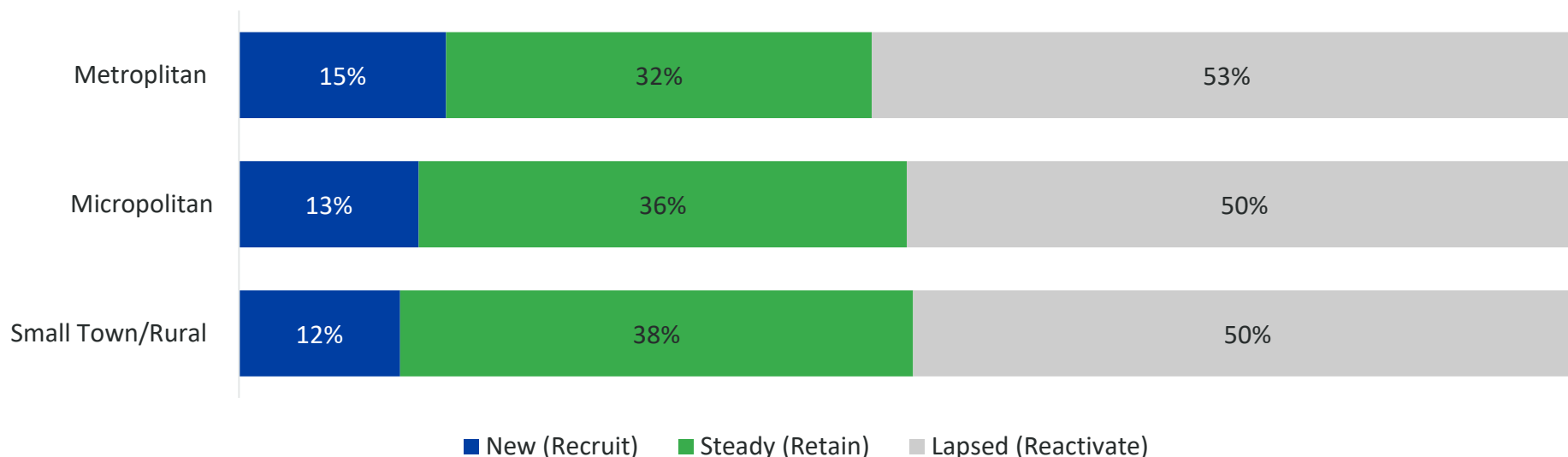


Note: The R3 category system applies age restrictions to ensure multi-year behavior is captured. For example, anglers categorized as “New” in 2025 must be at least 21, which helps exclude individuals who were previously fishing but only recently required a license due to the minimum age requirement of 16.

RESULTS: URBANIZATION BY ANGLER R3 CATEGORY

Generally, anglers residing in rural areas are slightly more likely to be steady, although declines have been observed in some rural counties. New and lapsed anglers are more likely found in major cities, which aligns with Iowa's overall population growth.

Urban-Rural Classification of Resident License Holder Address by R3 Category

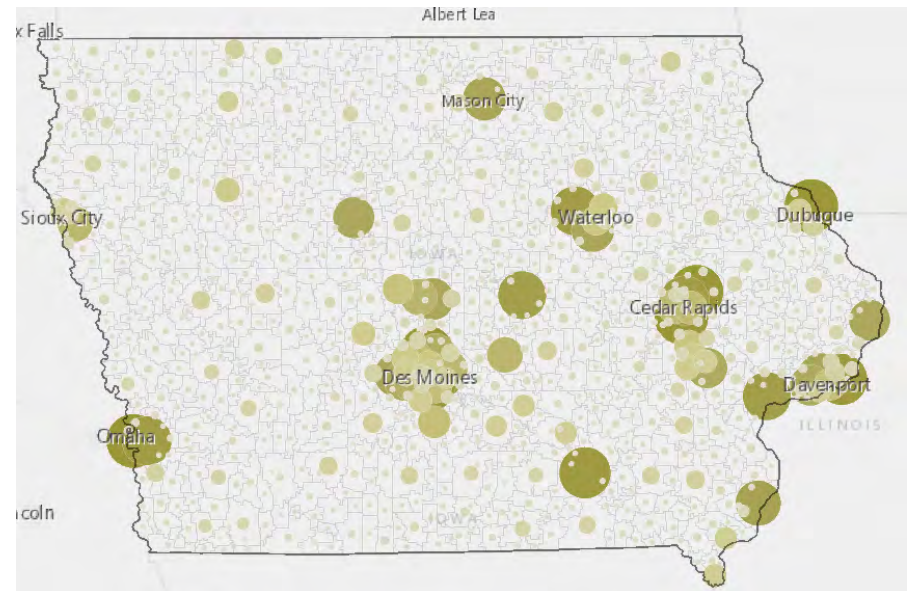


RESULTS: ANGLER CATEGORY BY ZIP CODE

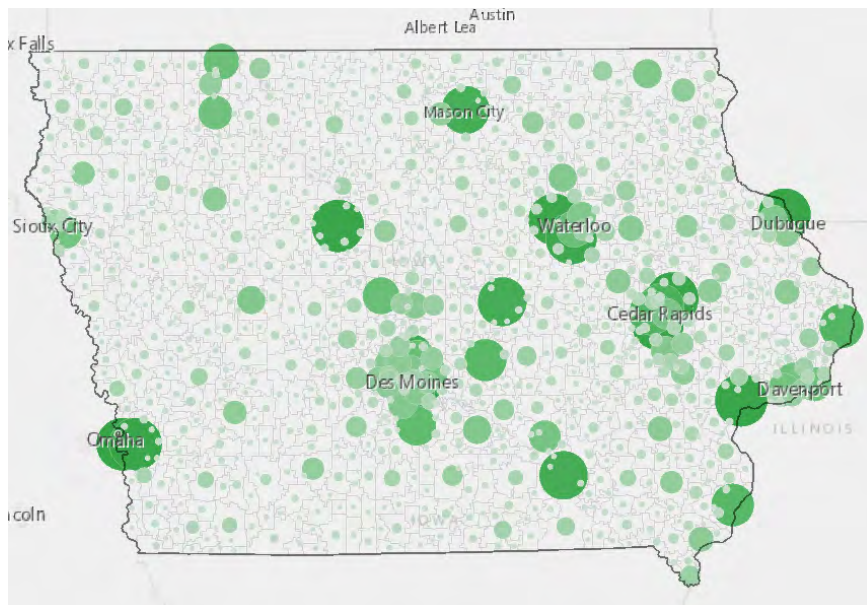
Ultimately, this project is meant to help guide state efforts to find potential new anglers, identify areas where demand for access might be growing, initiate marketing campaigns that focus on those areas, and inform the location of new sportfishing access. Mapping license holders within each R3 category reinforces the finding that new and lapsed anglers are proportionally more likely to reside outside of rural areas.

Dots are sized according to total number of anglers in the indicated angler category in that zip code.

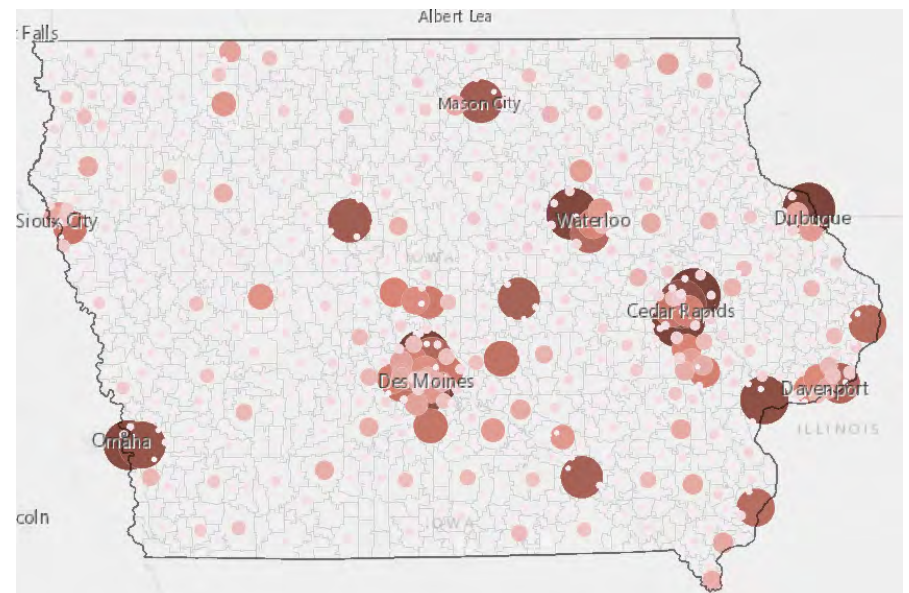
New anglers (Recruit)



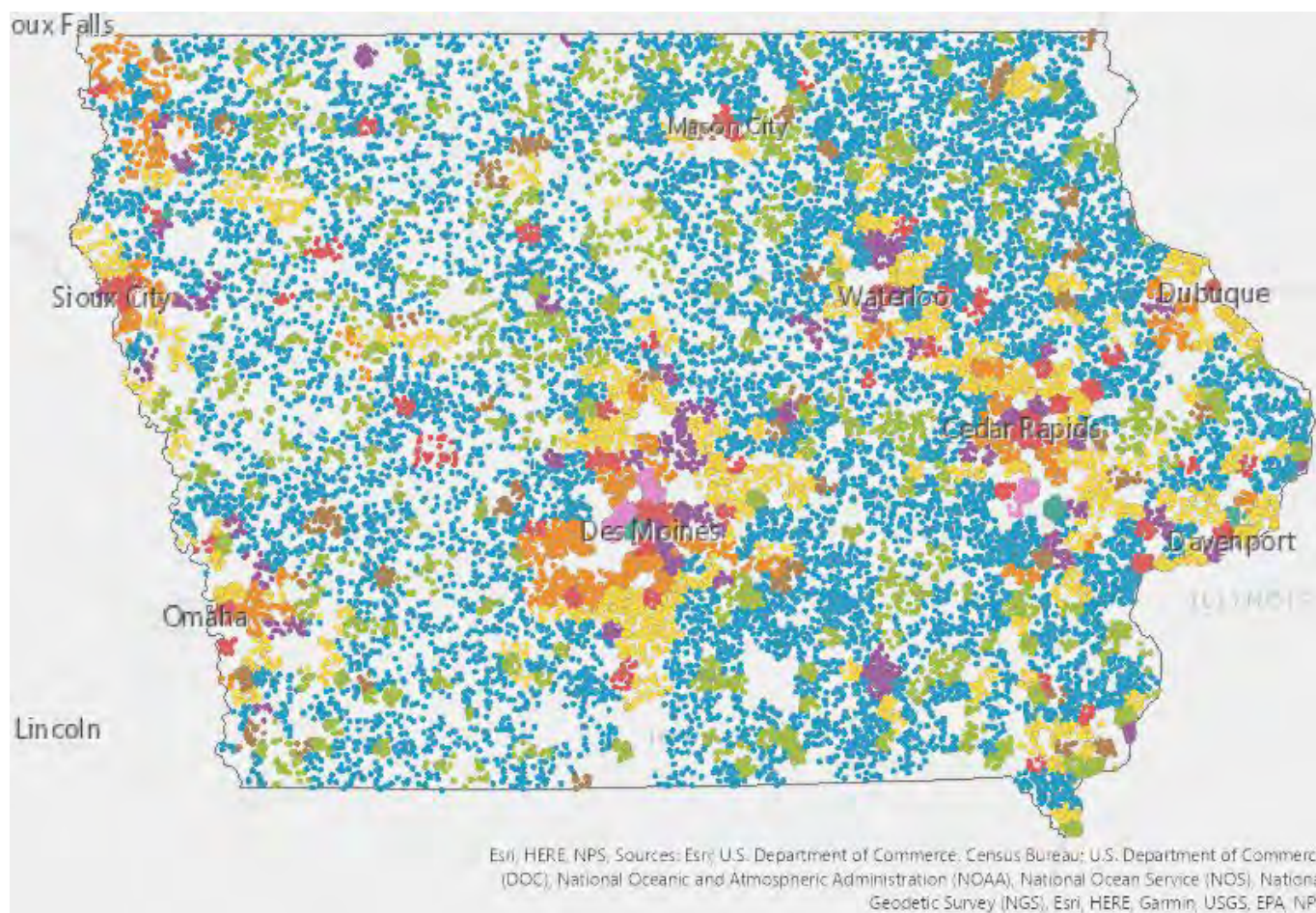
Steady anglers (Retain)



Lapsed anglers (Reactivate)



RESULTS: TOP ANGLER TAPESTRY SEGMENTS



Significant lifestyle differences can exist between two people of the same age, gender and income. Lifestyle analyses help describe a state's angler population, including their current stages in life, their recreational and hobby preferences, financial status, purchasing, entertainment preferences, and more.

The top ten Tapestry segments are mapped here. The results show although Iowa has mix of communities, the rural segments are most prevalent across the state.

RESULTS: TOP TAPESTRY SEGMENTS BY CITY

The Country Charm segment made up the highest percentage of anglers in 2024, followed closely by the Middle Ground, Heartland Communities, and Hometown Charm. The Country Charm segment is particularly important because they represent 20% of all resident anglers and have exhibited the most decline (15%).

The next page shares more about the Country Charm segment.

Tapestry Code	Name*	Percent of Anglers in 2024***	Angler Percent Change (2015 -2024)***	Angler Percent Change (2019 – 2024)***	Percent of Total Population (2025)
I7	Country Charm	19.5%	-15.2%	-15.1%	14.5%
K2	Middle Ground**	17.5%	7.9%	9.9%	10.8%
I3	Heartland Communities**	16.1%	-3.8%	-4.3%	10.9%
E3	Hometown Charm	6.5%	25.0%	28.0%	4.5%
K4	Classic Comfort	6.0%	-2.9%	-0.8%	6.0%
K7	Room to Roam**	5.9%	-11.4%	-9.9%	6.4%
H1	Flourishing Families	5.6%	-2.3%	-4.9%	6.0%
K3	Loyal Locals	4.0%	0.0%	-3.1%	5.7%
D3	Modern Minds**	4.0%	25.7%	21.8%	2.9%
K6	City Greens**	2.7%	48.4%	44.4%	2.4%

**Tapestry Segmentation information can be found in the state companion workbook and via ESRI's Segment Infographics Dashboard.*

*** = segment enjoys outdoor activities*

****Tables developed using a representative sample of all license holders.*

RESULTS: COUNTRY CHARM TAPESTRY SEGMENT

The Tapestry segmentation process paints a picture of the type of community an angler lives in and identifies their most likely habits and preferences. For example:



Tapestry Segment I7 Country Charm

19.5% of IA anglers*
14.5% of IA population

- Evenly distributed across metropolitan, micropolitan, and nonmetropolitan areas
- Most residents live outside defined towns or cities in very low-density regions
- Agriculture is at the heart of these communities, with many residents self-employed on their own farms or working for neighboring farms
- Tend to be older, with more married couples than singles; however, there is a higher-than-average presence of children under 18
- Shop for essentials in person, often using coupons, and they turn to online platforms for greater variety and better deals
- Create and repair things themselves, from home improvement and woodworking to gardening and crafting; often purchase tools and equipment for maintaining their cars, lawns, and gardens

With these insights, R3 messaging topics that would best resonate are:

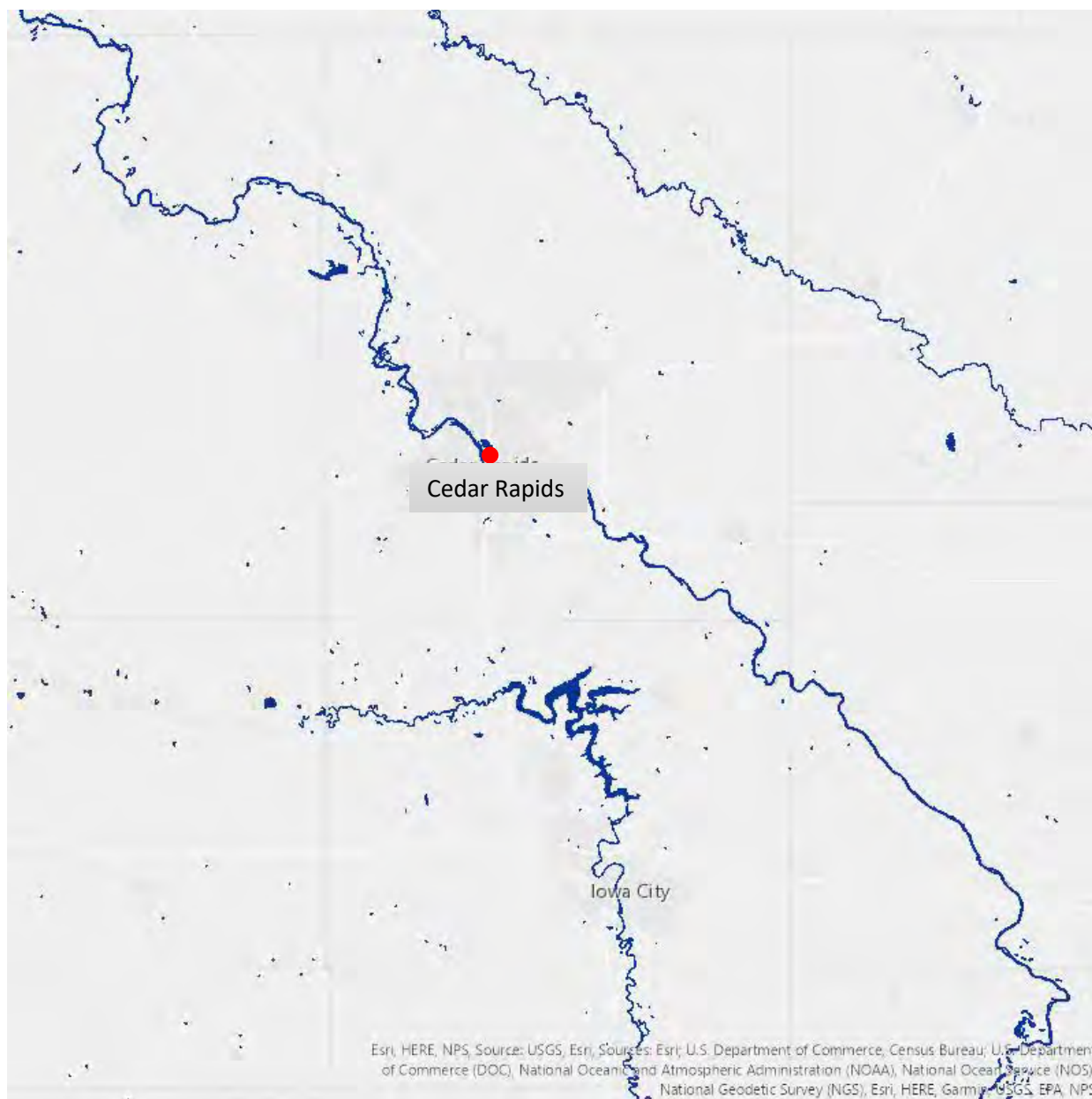
- Identify fishing as a way for **all generations to spend time outdoors** as a family, especially with grandchildren
- **Highlight the connection** of rural Iowa with family and the outdoors
- **Remind people that great fishing** exists outside of deer, duck, and pheasant seasons

*Estimates reflect the 2024 population
Data provided by ESRI's Segment Infographics Dashboard.

CASE STUDY: CEDAR RAPIDS

Agencies frequently reach out to their angler population to encourage license renewals. However, fishing as an outdoor recreational activity competes with a host of other outdoor activities. The results presented in this section can be used to identify the ideal mix of communication strategies which could be used to recruit, retain, and reactivate anglers within the state or targeted areas.

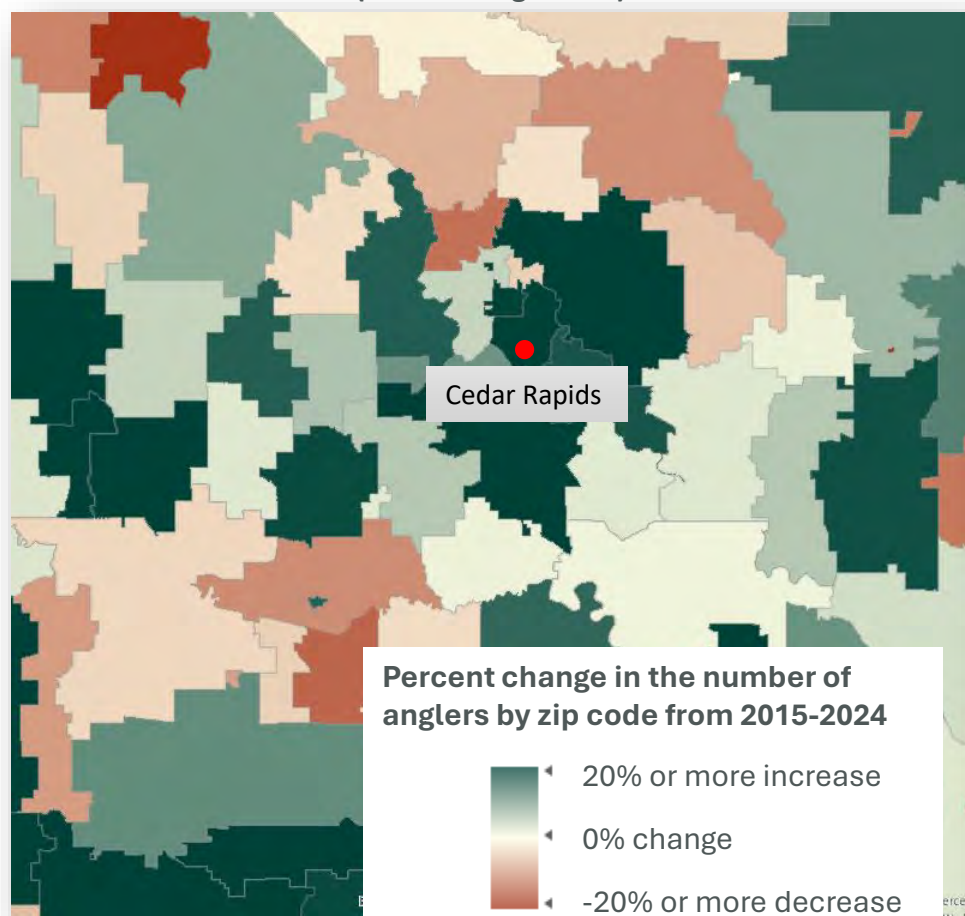
We are using the Cedar Rapids area as a case study.



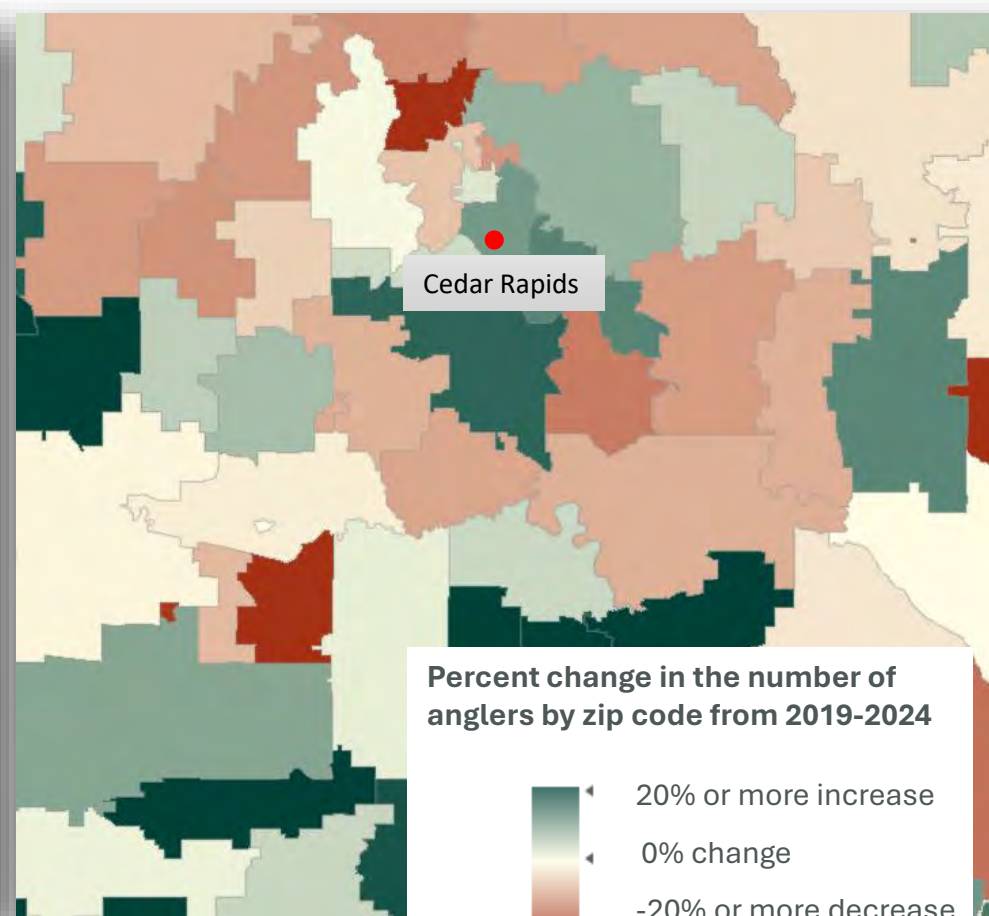
CASE STUDY: CEDAR RAPIDS CHANGE

Over the last decade, Cedar Rapids area experienced both population and angler growth. The area has multiple major industries including aerospace/defense, manufacturing, food, and biotechnology, which is appealing from the R3 perspective. The University of Iowa is also located nearby, which only adds to this area's appeal. The Cedar Rapids and Iowa City populations are younger and slightly more educated than the statewide average, so there are opportunities to outreach to a very important angler demographic.

Ten-year timeframe
(2015 through 2024)



Five-year timeframe
(2019 through 2024)



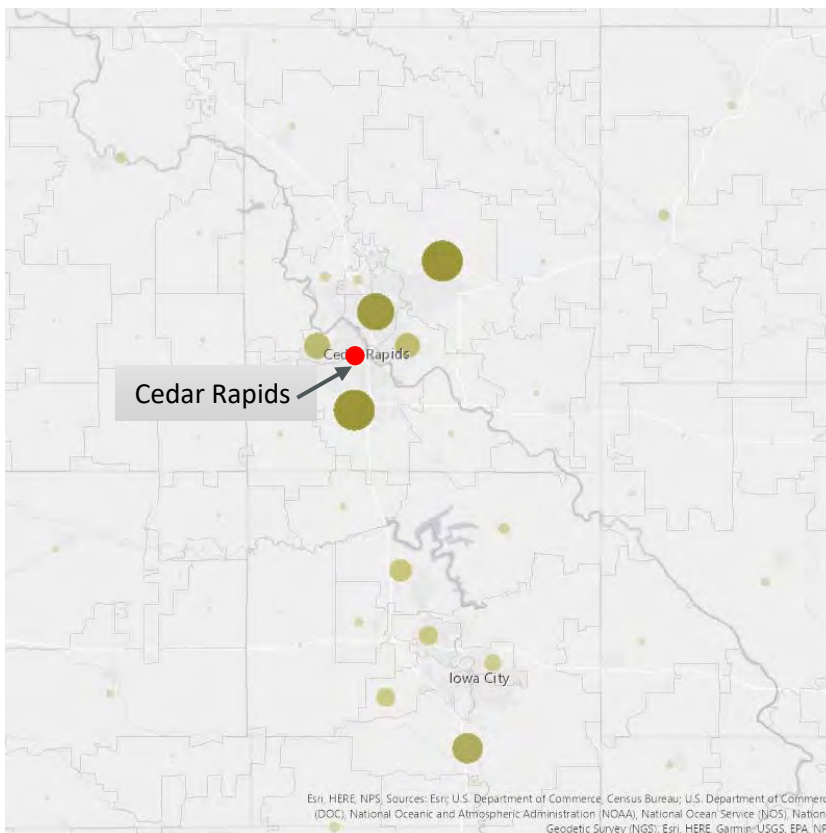
Note: To a certain extent the percent change in license holders reflects a variability in license records due to incomplete data for Personally Identifiable Information (PII) in earlier years.

CASE STUDY: ANGLERS BY R3 CATEGORY

Although the Cedar Rapids area has a strong population of steady anglers, we see there are opportunities with other populations.

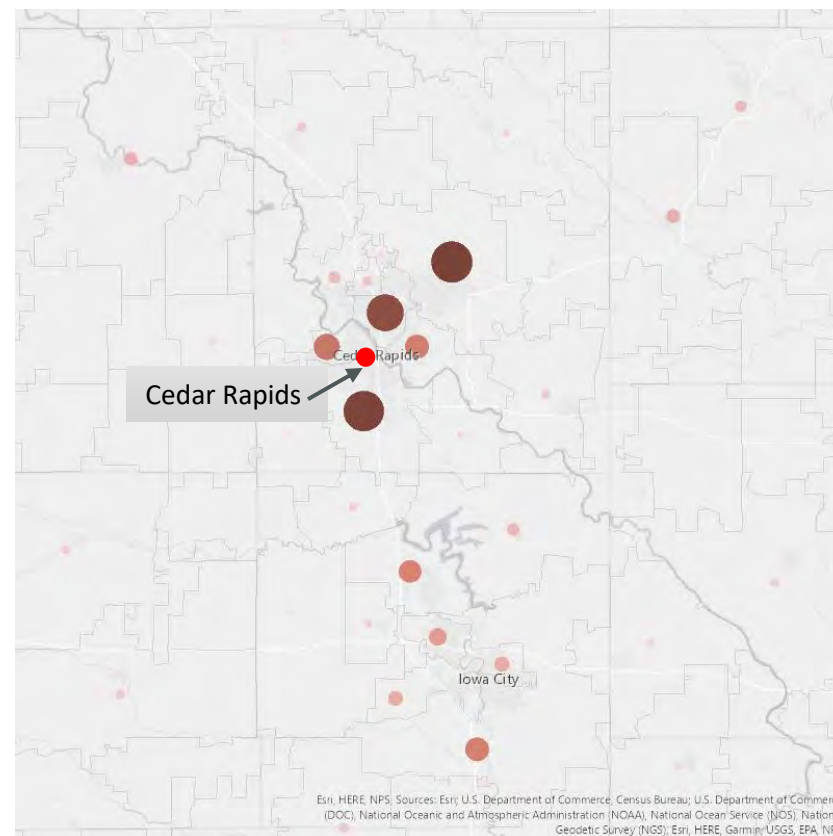
By zooming in closer, we see there are large numbers of new and lapsed anglers in and around Cedar Rapids.

This could be a function of younger people moving in, but no prioritizing fishing as their preferred activity.



New anglers (Recruit)

Dots are sized according to total number of anglers in the indicated angler category in that zip code.



Lapsed anglers (Reactive)

Maps developed using a representative sample of all license holders.

CASE STUDY: ANGLER TAPESTRY SEGMENTS

Tapestry segments for both new and lapsed anglers have a high degree of similarities.

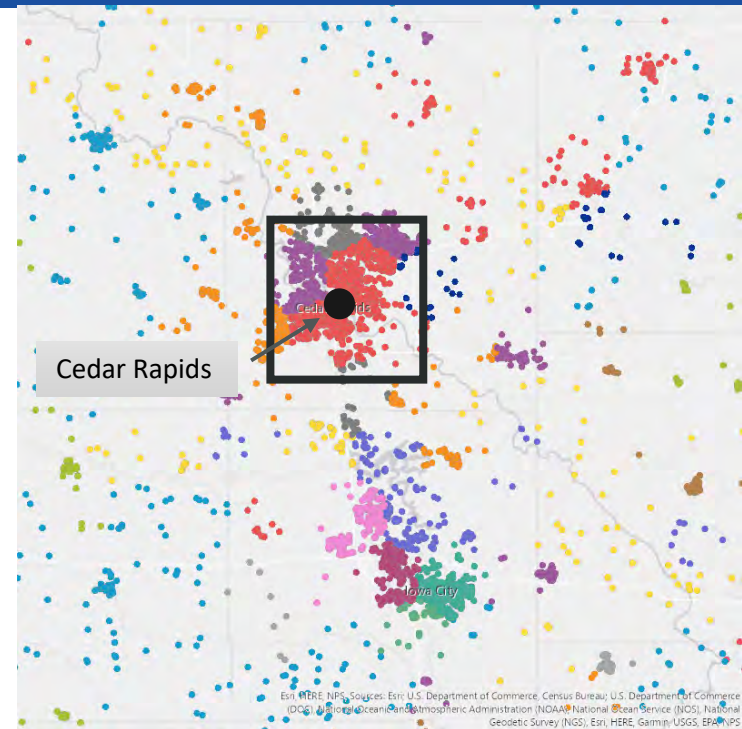
This can be advantageous for marketing efforts because common themes to reengage or spur interest in fishing can be employed across both groups.

For example, communities around the Cedar Rapids metro area fit the 'Middle Ground' segment, which was the second most common segment in Iowa.

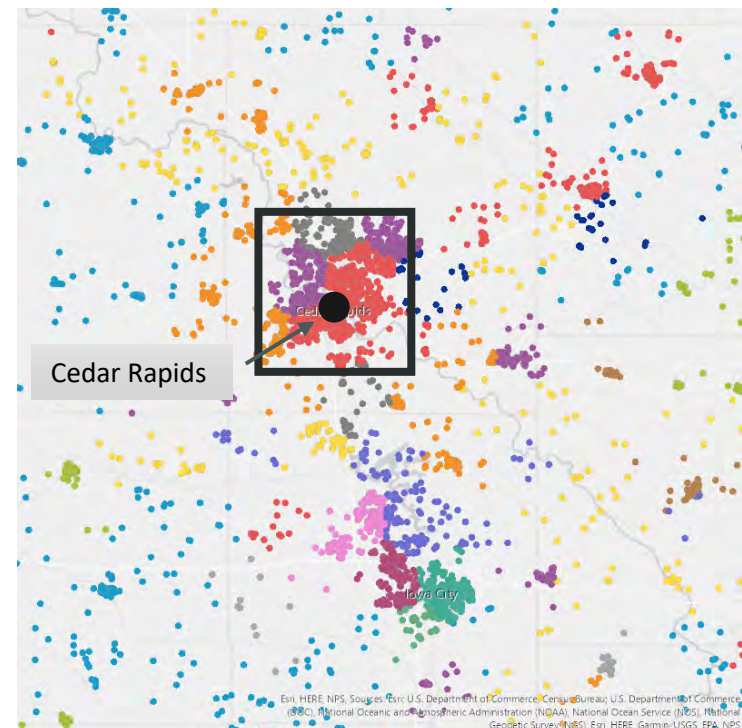
In the next slide, we'll explore this segment and make some R3 recommendations.

- K2: Middle Ground
- I7: Country Charm
- I3: Heartland Communities
- K4: Classic Comfort
- H1: Flourishing Families
- K7: Room to Roam
- D3: Modern Minds
- K3: Loyal Locals
- K6: City Greens
- L1: Savvy Suburbanites
- B2: College Towns
- H2: Boomburbs
- E4: Mobile Meadows
- I6: Southern Satellites
- Other

New angler tapestries (Recruit)



Lapsed angler tapestries (Reactivate)



Maps developed using a representative sample of all license holders.

CASE STUDY: MIDDLE GROUND SEGMENT

Typical communities that fit the Middle Ground Tapestry Segment and are described as:



Tapestry Segment K2 Middle Ground

17.5% of IA anglers*
10.8% of IA population

- Suburban neighborhoods that are slightly younger than U.S. average
- Tend to consist of married couples, cohabitating couples, and single-person households
- Tend to shop at discount grocery chains and frequent fast-food restaurants
- Use social media as well as newspapers and magazines
- Recreational interests often include professional and college sports, fishing, and gardening
- Vacations are typically taken to nearby states, especially those offering beaches or sightseeing opportunities

With these insights, R3 messaging topics that would best resonate are:

- Fishing as a **way to spend time with children**. Research has shown that people take their kids fishing at a young age because their parents did the same.
- Facilitate **opportunities for social connection** with friends and other couples.
- Use the **emails in Iowa's license system** to connect with anglers and create custom messages that connect people with the information the [Fish Local](#) website.
- Work with **the University of Iowa to message to students** about the great fishing in the Iowa City area.

*Estimates reflect the 2024 population

Data provided by ESRI's Segment Infographics Dashboard.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO ENGAGE ANGLERS

Even if fishing is someone's preferred outdoor activity, it faces stiff competition. Other activities perceived to be easier compete for our time. Outlined below are key recommendations and supporting research to help agencies position fishing as a preferred choice among anglers balancing competing demands on their time.

- **Fishing information should be in one easy to find place.** More than anything, anglers go to the agency website for information. Easy to understand regulations, area fishing maps and nearby fishing opportunities should be readily available. Include boat launches, shore fishing opportunities, and nearby available services, like parks and restaurants.
- **Make fishing trip planning easy.** Helping anglers with planning can recapture lapsed anglers and facilitate participation for new and steady anglers. Pairing fishing with other activities (especially with kids or grandkids) is a great marketing strategy.
- **Put educational material on the state agency website.** New anglers come back when they catch fish. But, they may lack or feel intimidated by the specialized knowledge and equipment required. Prior research has shown state agency websites are the preferred media platform to locate instructional materials ([ASA and Southwick Associates 2025](#)). Agencies should also be active on YouTube.
- **Focus on anglers where they live with marketing materials that truly resonate.** By using Tapestry™ data, marketing and communications teams can identify exactly who they're talking to and the best media channel for people in that area.
- **Additional research resources include:**
 - American Sportfishing Association and Southwick Associates (2025). *Why Anglers Quit and How Can We Improve Retention Rates*. Funded by Multi-State Conservation Grant F24AP00087 as part of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
 - Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and Ipsos (2024). *Psychology of Churn: Understanding Fishing & Boating Attrition*. Funded by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service F23AC00806 as part of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
 - American Sportfishing Association and Southwick Associates (2020). *Angler Personas: Understanding Anglers' Motivations*. Funded by Multi-State Conservation Grant F19AP00114 as part of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
 - Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation and Responsive Management (2019). *Actionable Strategies for Angler Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation*. Funded by Multi-State Conservation Grant F18AP00165 as part of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



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