

2025 Master Angler Participant Survey

Summary

The 2025 Master Angler Participant Survey collected feedback from anglers who participated between 2020 and 2025 to assess satisfaction and gather input on possible program adjustments. Of 9,198 emailed participants, 863 responded. Nearly half had participated only once in the past five years, and 68% said earning a patch is their main motivation. Results show broad satisfaction, with most respondents saying both the number of awards and species covered are “just right.” Eighty-seven percent felt the program’s difficulty is appropriate, and over 90% supported maintaining current species lists for both the Master Angler and State Record programs. The only issue with notable division was whether to group sunfish species, supported by 64% of respondents. Open-ended comments were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the program’s value as a personal achievement and suggesting modest improvements such as tiered recognition or revised patches. Overall, findings indicate strong support for continuing the program as is, with no immediate changes planned.

For questions or suggestion about the Master Angler program, please contact Caitlin Boon at MasterAngler@michigan.gov.

Background

The Master Angler program, established in 1974, recognizes anglers who catch large fish that meet or exceed a minimum length requirement. Qualifying anglers receive a patch featuring a different fish each year. In the past decade, the program has transitioned to an online application system and simplified its categories, resulting in significant growth. Average annual approvals increased from about 1,100 in 2010–2014 to roughly 3,300 in 2020–2024. Traditionally, large increases in entries have been balanced by adjusting minimum length requirements.

The 2025 survey sought feedback from recent participants to help determine whether anglers prefer a more exclusive program (with stricter size requirements) or a more inclusive one (with more species or lower thresholds).

Results & Analysis

The survey was emailed to 9,198 people who had participated between 2020 and 2025 and provided a valid email address. A total of 863 responses were received. Nearly half (47%) of respondents had submitted fish in only one of the past five years, 33% in two or three years,

and 18% in four or five years (Figure 1). This suggests that while the program attracts new entrants annually, fewer anglers participate repeatedly, possibly due to the challenge of catching qualifying fish or a sense of having ‘achieved’ the milestone once.

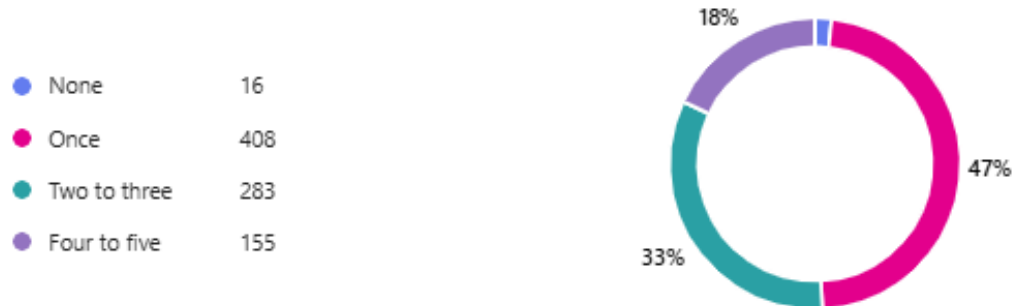


Figure 1. Responses to “In the last five years, how many years have you submitted fish to the Master Angler program?”

For most respondents (68%), getting a patch was the most important factor in participating in Master Angler (Figure 2). This confirms that recognition through a physical reward remains a key driver of engagement. Overall, participants showed a preference for inclusivity (valuing opportunities to participate and be recognized) over exclusivity.

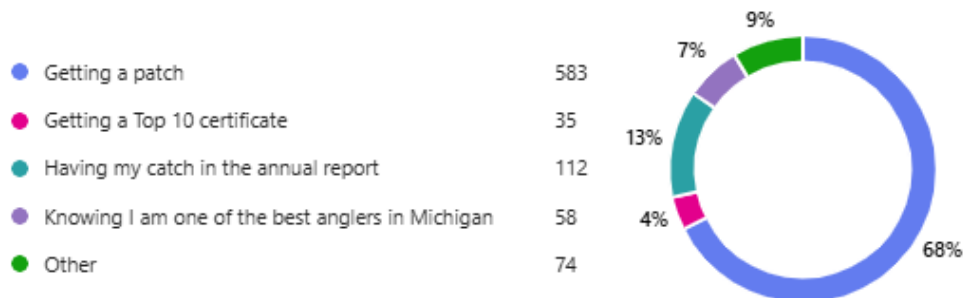


Figure 2. Responses to: “Which is the most important to you as a participant in Master Angler?”

Participants were also asked about whether awards are too easy to achieve, too hard, or just right. 87% responded that the number of approvals currently is just right, which demonstrates strong program alignment with participant expectations (Figure 3).

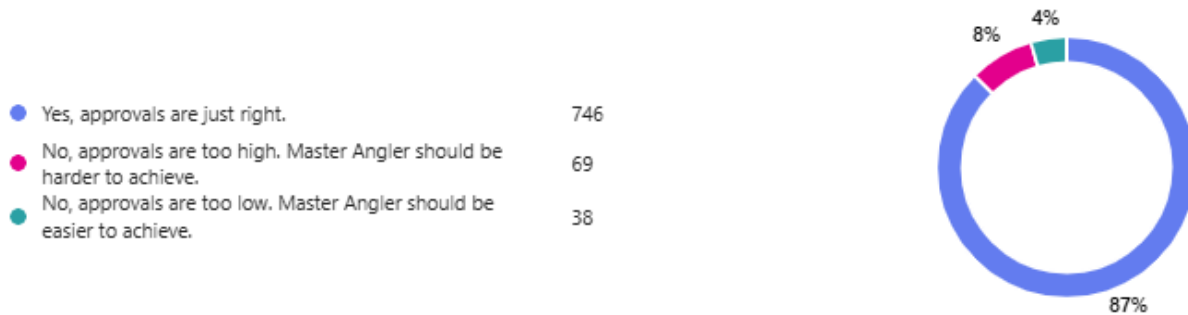


Figure 3. Responses to: “In the last ten years, program changes have made entering Master Angler easier and awards have more than doubled as a result. Is the number of awards correct?”

Respondents were able to enter comments regarding the number of approved entries. Many commenters reinforced their choice that the number of approvals is just right how it is. Several commenters noted inconsistencies in difficulty thresholds between species. Some representative comments include:

- “It shouldn’t be a competition between anglers, it should be a milestone for individuals. I think rewarding people for a great catch is the way it should be, regardless of how many achieve that goal.”
- “The requirements are such that it is difficult to catch a qualifying fish for the average angler. They are also at a level where they are achievable.”
- “There are some that are probably too easy and some that are too difficult, but on average are about right.”

The Master Angler program periodically receives questions about the inclusion of new species in Master Angler and the State Record program. Support for maintaining current species lists in both the Master Angler and State Record programs was nearly unanimous (91% and 92%, respectively; Figures 4 and 5). This finding indicates broad satisfaction with the current scope and little demand for expansion.

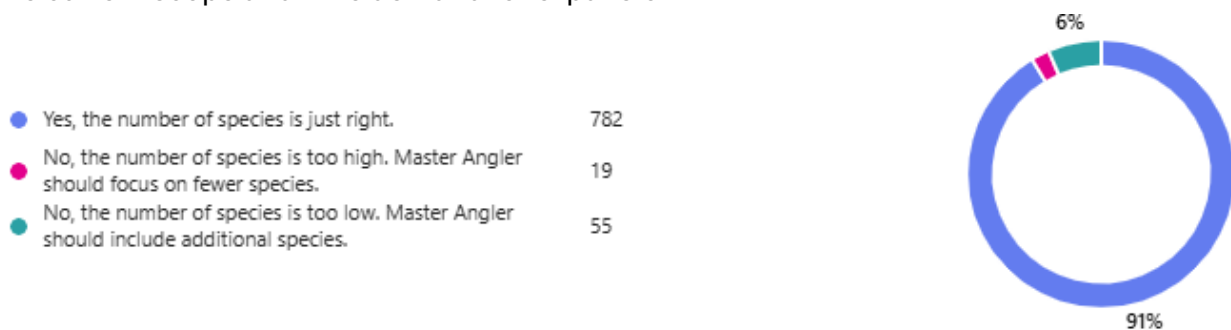


Figure 4. Responses to: “The Master Angler program currently awards patches for 44 different species of fish. Is this the right number?”

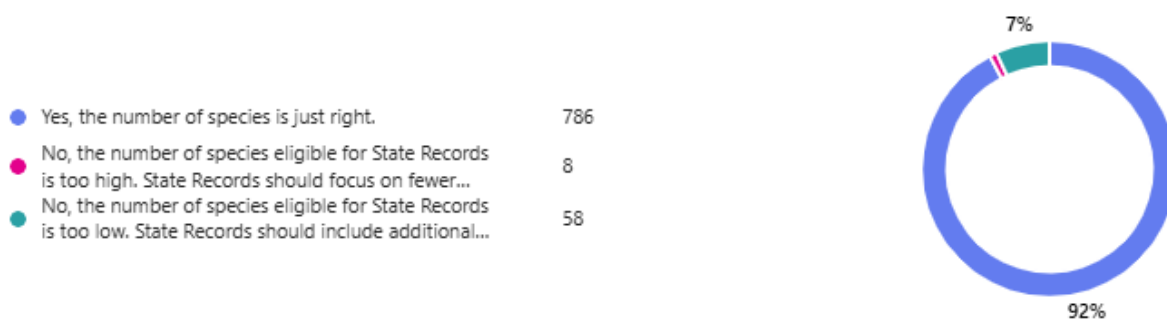


Figure 5. Responses to: “The State Record program currently recognizes the same 44 species of fish as Master Angler. Is this the right number?”

The potential grouping of sunfish species (Bluegill, Pumpkinseed, Green Sunfish, Redear Sunfish, Warmouth, and Hybrid Sunfish) generated mixed opinions (Figure 6). Sixty-four percent supported grouping, citing simpler administration and fewer identification issues, while 36% preferred keeping them separate to preserve distinct recognition opportunities. Comments around this topic suggested that because these species are popular with youth anglers, if they were combined the minimum length should be kept at 9 inches. Other commenters suggested that this was an opportunity for educating anglers on telling the species apart. Some commenters suggested keeping Bluegill and Pumpkinseed distinct and having all other sunfish grouped, or having Bluegill as one species and all other sunfish grouped. Decisions on program changes will be made in consultation with fisheries biologists and informed by participant feedback.

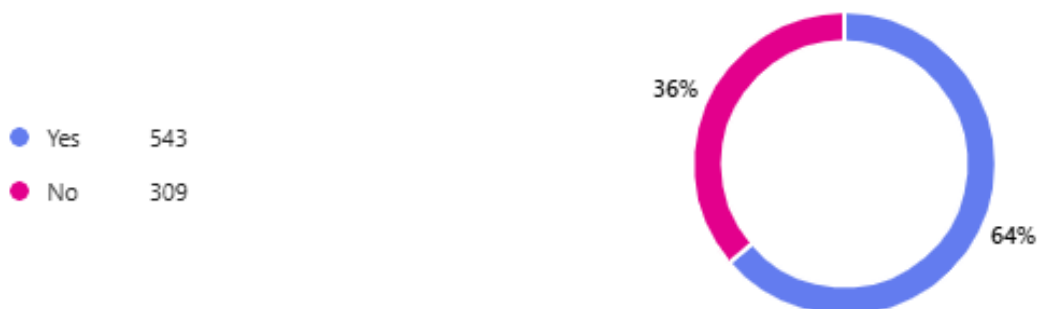


Figure 6. Responses to: “Due to species similarity and ability to hybridize, sunfish species (Bluegill, Pumpkinseed, Green Sunfish, Redear Sunfish, Warmouth, and Hybrid Sunfish) are very difficult for many anglers to tell apart. Would you support sunfish species being grouped together in the Master Angler program?”

Respondents were given an opportunity to provide any comments on the Master Angler program. This open-ended feedback reflected strong enthusiasm and loyalty to the

program. Suggestions for improvement – such as tiered recognition, adjusted species standards, or redesigned patches – indicate constructive engagement rather than dissatisfaction. The responses demonstrate that participants value the Master Angler program as both a personal goal and a point of pride in Michigan’s angling community. Some representative comments include:

- “Possibly a different standard for inland waters as opposed to the same fish caught in the Great Lakes.”
- “Consider two tiers: A regular Master Angler and an award for the Top 5 catches in each species.”
- “It is a great program and gives us anglers something to shoot for.”
- “I feel that there should be a program in place, like Ohio, where you have to achieve 5 “Michigan fish” in order to get the master angler.”
- “I know you are tracking 44 different species but it would have been nice if the patch represented the species I submitted. In addition the patch is a little too large to attach to a ball cap.”

Next Steps

Survey results indicate strong support for the current Master Angler program. Any future adjustments should balance the program’s accessibility with the sense of accomplishment that comes from qualifying. Fisheries Division staff will continue internal discussions, particularly regarding the grouping of sunfish species, but no immediate changes are planned.