

Special Section on Black Bass 2025 Symposium Proceedings

Exploring areas of conflict and cooperation between black bass tournament participants and other lake users in eastern Ontario

Joel Zhang^{1,*}, Alice E. I. Abrams¹, Luc LaRochelle¹, Jordanna N. Bergman^{1,2}, Christine Beaudoin³,
Nathan Young⁴, Cory D. Suski⁵, and Steven J. Cooke¹

¹Fish Ecology and Conservation Physiology Laboratory, Department of Biology and Institute of Environmental and Interdisciplinary Science, Carleton University, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

²Department of Geography, University of Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

³Université de l'Ontario Français, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

⁴School of Sociological and Anthropological Studies, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

⁵Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, University of Illinois, Urbana, Illinois, USA

*Corresponding author: Joel Zhang. Email: joelzhang@cmail.carleton.ca.

Abstract

Objective: Conflicts are common within and between fishing sectors, yet conflict can also arise between fishers and other water users. This is the case for several water bodies in eastern Ontario, Canada, where black bass *Micropterus* spp. tournament anglers and organizers have been in conflict with other local lake users and property owners who are represented by various lake associations. The objective of this study is to report on our experiences of trying to promote collaboration through mediation between lake association members and property owners, and tournament anglers and organizers, in the face of deteriorating relationships between the user groups.

Methods: We held independent focus group sessions with representatives from both groups and then held a joint workshop. The purpose of the workshop was to create space for relationship building and trust development while identifying opportunities for working collaboratively on issues of mutual concern.

Results: The focus group sessions revealed that the common issues for both groups were primarily related to congestion and the use of shared waters (e.g., number of boats on the water, fishing near residential docks, and parking issues). The workshop was perceived by the research team as productive and amicable. However, at the conclusion of the workshop, we were notified that the lake associations would be pursuing other means in their attempts to limit black bass tournaments rather than working collaboratively with tournament organizers and anglers.

Conclusion: We share the lessons that were learned from this experience and identify opportunities to reconcile issues that are related to shared use of water bodies and find places of alignment between groups, including a mutual concern for healthy fish populations that benefit all.

Keywords: bass tournament, black bass, conflict, recreational fishing, resource conflict

Lay summary

There have long been examples of conflict between various groups concerning the issue of tournaments. We found areas where two user groups align and could collaborate in the future, although issues persist with more work needing to be completed to foster a trusting and respectful relationship.

Introduction

Conflicts are common in the natural resources space and can arise for many different reasons and manifest in various forms (Humphreys, 2005). Ultimately, conflicts are disagreements between different parties over opposing opinions and/or objectives to certain issues (Redpath et al., 2013; Zhang, Yeung, et al., 2026). Conflict is particularly well known in the context of fisheries resources (Charles, 1992). Such conflict can be between individual fishers within a sector (e.g., between fly fishers and bait fishers; Arlinghaus, 2005), between commercial fishers from different countries who are exploiting a common pool resource (Spijkers et al., 2019), or between different sectors (e.g., between the recreational and commercial sector that want to access a common stock of fish; Dubois & Zografos, 2012). Conflicts are more likely to arise in situations where resources are scarce or when the resource is of high socioeconomic value (Mildner et al., 2011) and may also arise when one group is involved in resource use or exploitation but the other is opposed to the activity (e.g., anti-fishing perspectives; Arlinghaus & Schwab, 2011; Balon, 2000; Larsson, 2019, water skier–angler conflict; Gramann & Burdge, 1981). The consequences of conflict can range from limited access and ongoing negative interactions that affect individual wellness through to physical violence (Nillesen & Bulte, 2014). For that reason, there have been many attempts to resolve conflict by using policy (e.g., Tyler, 1999), mediation (Engel & Korf, 2005; Higgs, 2007), legal mechanisms (Cosens, 2008), and trust building (Juerges et al., 2018). However, interactions themselves may instigate further conflicts in a positive feedback loop and, in a sense, exacerbate the existing conflicts. Attempts to collaborate and comanage can be costly and require intense time commitments (Young et al., 2020), are often not linear, and can reinforce preexisting conflicts and power asymmetries, potentially leading to negative outcomes (e.g., understanding who plays a role in collaboration or revealing dissonance between groups; García et al., 2019; Zachrisson & Lindahl, 2013). It is therefore important to build systems and collaborations that consider the perspectives of multiple stakeholders and are flexible in the face of disagreements (Boström et al., 2015).

Black bass *Micropterus* spp. competitive angling events (herein, “tournaments”) have grown in popularity in North America and across the world (Driscoll et al., 2012; Quinn & Paukert, 2009; Schramm et al., 1991). Tournaments are often transient, moving from one water body to another across a fishing season. However, within a single waterway, multiple tournament events from different organizations can occur over the course of a fishing season. Although tournament anglers compete for fish against nontournament anglers, there is little evidence that such competition is the basis for meaningful conflict (see Wilde et al., 1998), especially given that tournaments are live-release events and

high levels of postrelease survival are the norm (see Elliot et al., 2025; Kerns et al., 2016; Sylvia et al., 2021 for recent examples). However, there is evidence that conflict can occur between tournament participants (and organizers) and other water users (e.g., other recreational fishers, boaters; Driscoll et al., 2012; Kerr & Kamke, 2003; Schramm et al., 1991). Of particular note, 64% of the North American fisheries management agencies that responded to surveys about black bass tournaments identified that conflicts occurred either “often” or “on occasion” between tournaments and nonangling user groups in 2005 (Schramm & Hunt, 2007) and 2012 (Driscoll et al., 2012). More recently, Driscoll et al. (2012) asked fishery agency chiefs about the basis for conflicts that are related to black bass tournaments, with most respondents noting that crowding at boat ramps and on the water were primary factors that contribute to conflict. However, to our knowledge, there have never been any attempts to more deeply explore conflict between tournaments and other water resource users.

Eastern Ontario, Canada (specifically, the Rideau Lakes Waterway and surrounding area), located within Fisheries Management Zone 18, is a region where black bass populations are common in most water bodies (Zhang, Philipp, et al., 2026), with an open season that spans from the third Saturday in June until December 15. The opening of black bass season draws in a combination of semiprofessional bass fishing tournaments as well as more informal local events (i.e., club tournaments). In Fisheries Management Zone 18, these tournaments are complicated multijurisdictional/multiscalar events that involve collaboration between different levels of government, including the municipalities that often own boat ramps and parking areas; the provincial Ministry of Natural Resources (OMNR); federal bodies such as Parks Canada, which has legal authority over the Rideau Canal Waterway; and Transport Canada, which deals with boater safety (alongside relevant enforcement bodies such as the Ontario Provincial Police, Conservation Officers with the OMNR, and Parks Canada wardens). As such, none have full jurisdiction over these events, which do not require permitting (aside from event permits from Parks Canada for those held on the Rideau Canal Waterway). Tournaments attract individuals both locally and from afar, launching boats to prepare (e.g., pre-fish, scouting) and/or attend the event and weighing fish at the end of the day at a central location after selecting for the largest fish sizes and keeping them alive using live wells. These same water bodies are also popular with other waterway users. Most of these waters have permanent and seasonal shoreline property owners and temporary visitors (renters or resort patrons) that spend time at these properties during weekends, in shoulder seasons, and throughout much of the summer (when bass fishing is legal in that

area). The water bodies are directly used by kayakers, canoers, paddle boarders, sailors, swimmers, and other power boat users, to name a few (see Watson's paddling guide; [Watson, 2024](#)), with some of those individuals engaging in bass fishing. Moreover, some property owners participate in tournaments, although our observations suggest that this is relatively uncommon (S. J. Cooke, personal communications). Over the past decade, our team has anecdotally observed evidence of emerging conflict on social media (e.g., Facebook), on traditional media, and through informal discussions where water users (often affiliated with various lake associations) have complained publicly about issues including parking congestion at boat ramps, infringing on properties (e.g., anglers casting toward their docks), safety (potential for collisions), noise, boat wakes, and stockpiling bass at release sites. Although these data are not quantified or compiled, it does not take a deep examination of online forums or local blogs and newspapers to find examples. Despite these reports, conflicts between shoreline property owners (representing a broad range of other water users) and tournament anglers remain understudied.

Over the years, our team (being the team of researchers working out of the Fish Ecology and Conservation Physiology Lab at Carleton University) has established collegial relationships and trust with relevant actors in both the tournament and lake association space. This has created an opportunity for us to serve both as knowledge producers and, to the best of our abilities, as mediators and mobilizers of that knowledge between groups to better understand conflict and identify opportunities for resolving or mitigating those conflicts. There have long been intersectoral conflicts among different user groups in the water-based recreation space that occur due to differing attitudes and beliefs on resource use ([Arlinghaus, 2005](#); [Confer et al., 2005](#)). On many water bodies, this conflict is seen between tournament anglers and other user groups (anglers or otherwise; [Arlinghaus, 2005](#); [Wilde et al., 1998](#)), but the reasons have rarely been explored in published research, even preliminarily. Thus, in this study, we report on our experiences of trying to promote collaboration through mediation between lake association members and property owners as well as tournament anglers and organizers in the face of deteriorating relationships between the two groups in the case region. We report on the outcome of focus groups that were held independently with lake association representatives and tournament anglers/organizers. In each of the focus groups, we identified primary areas of conflict that revealed potential opportunities for working synergistically to address issues that are of mutual concern. We then held a workshop with individuals from both groups that was intended to further explore those areas of mutual interest and begin to work toward building trust and mutual respect that, over time, could address many of the shared issues of concern. Here, we report on our findings and learned lessons while acknowledging that this is one more step in the story of water resource conflicts in eastern Ontario. In reality, comanagement and collaboration are complex, requiring several levels of actors to come together (see [Pomeroy et al., 2007](#)), and this study ultimately

provides a potential path for reconciliation and respectful dialogue.

Methods

Initial identification of conflict

To better understand the main areas of conflict between lake association groups and tournament anglers and organizers, we coordinated a series of discussions including focus groups and a workshop among members of various lake associations across eastern Ontario (centered on the Rideau Canal Waterways area) and individuals who organize and participate in tournaments in this area. Collectively, the lake associations (operating as a coalition that is focused on issues related to lakewide issues, including tournaments) represent thousands of members (mainly property owners) who meet regularly to discuss issues pertaining to their respective lakes. It is important to recognize that not all property owners on a given water body are members of a given lake association, and there can be diverse perspectives and opinions held among individuals within lake associations. In the current study, we refer to "lake associations" specifically if an issue was discussed in focus groups and the workshop but may use "property owners" more broadly. Some of the lakes within this study are popular fishing destinations ([Zhang, Philipp, et al., 2026](#)) due to their wide array of recreationally important fish species and their known ability to produce "trophy" (a subjective term referring to fish of large length or weight that is often used in the fishing world) black bass, including Largemouth Bass *Micropterus nigricans* and Smallmouth Bass *M. dolomieu*. As a result, several prominent bass fishing tournaments occur on these lakes annually, ranging from larger semiprofessional events with up to 150 boats to smaller informal events with fewer than 20 boats. There has long been anecdotal evidence of conflict between waterfront property owners on these lakes and tournament anglers and organizers on social media and by word of mouth. This anecdotal evidence was confirmed through a survey that was completed on Big Rideau Lake in an effort to improve the management of black bass in the Rideau Watershed (A. E. I. Abrams, unpublished data).

Phase 1: Recruitment and focus groups

Key informants were identified as active members of bass tournament organizations and lake association representatives in eastern Ontario. We conducted nonprobabilistic purposive sampling ([Howarth et al., 2024](#); [Taylor & Blake, 2015](#)) for our focus group and workshop by purposely targeting individuals who were involved with tournaments in addition to lake association members and property owners. We recruited participants via email invitations to better reach our target demographic, as email addresses were readily available. Key informants for both groups were identified as individuals who were involved in leadership roles (formally or informally) and were aware of this conflict ([Taylor & Blake, 2015](#)). Data collection was split into two phases: (1) virtual and separate focus groups with lake association members and tournament anglers and (2) a joint user-group workshop with both an in-person and virtual participation format. We obtained ethics

approval for data collection from Carleton University Research Ethics Board B (CUREB-B Project #118366, phase 1; CUREB Project #120062, phase 2).

The first phase consisted of focus groups that served as explorative interviews with a group facilitator to allow for an in-depth discussion and elicitation of beliefs within a user group (Gibbs, 1997; Morgan, 1996; Parker & Tritter, 2006). Focus groups can provide a platform for stakeholder-led generation of novel ideas and can be a useful way to develop solution-oriented programs (Fern, 1982; Nyumba et al., 2018; Race et al., 1994). It is a method that has often been embraced in human dimensions research (e.g., Minnis et al., 1997; Nyumba et al., 2018). The focus groups were held as one virtual meeting, with each group including lake association members and tournament organizers/anglers to describe and identify the reasons for conflict from the perspectives of the user groups and brainstorm avenues for collaborative resolution. In total, there were nine representatives from seven different lake associations and seven tournament organizers and participants who participated in group 1 and group 2 discussions in phase 1, respectively. Each group was offered the same four open-ended, broadscale questions and given time to discuss each of the questions to capture nuances in the nature of the conflict and resolution strategies (see Taylor & Blake, 2015). The focus groups lasted 1.5–2 h (Taylor & Blake, 2015), and all answers were audio recorded and transcribed by members of the research team. The four open-ended discussion questions were as follows:

1. What is your lived experience of conflict surrounding bass fishing tournaments?
2. What are possible avenues for cooperation (individual, communities, management, governance)?
3. What does success look like to you (for conflict resolution and cooperation)?
4. What has changed that has yielded a shift toward negative relationships between tournament anglers and waterfront property owners (given evidence of cooperation between tournament anglers and lake associations in the past)?

Answers to each of the questions were thematically analyzed using inductive coding through identification of themes that were based on the four questions by two members of the team and compared for interrater reliability (DeJonckheere et al., 2024; Proudfoot, 2023; Saldaña, 2021). First, individual responses were summarized into shorter statements and assigned codes that corresponded to each of the questions. These answers or parts of answers to each question were then merged into distinct themes.

The answers that were coded under the inductive themes were then synthesized into an inductive theme of alignment between the groups, highlighting areas that the groups agreed on and those that they identified as being in need of improvement (Table 1). These themes were used to guide the questions that were asked in phase 2 of this study (by looking at the most important areas of conflict and alignment between the two groups).

Table 1 Potential alignment between user groups identified per theme and per question after phase 1 focus groups with lake association representatives and tournament organizers/participants.

Questions	Lack of mutual understanding	Historical changes to group relations	User group tipping point	Lack of communication
Q1: What is your lived experience of conflict surrounding bass fishing tournaments	Need for mutual understanding	Perceptions not based on empirical evidence	Congestion/safety on waterway	Disconnected lines of communication
Q2: Possible avenues for cooperation	Need for mutual understanding	Perceptions not based on empirical evidence	Mutual respect in shared space	Disconnected lines of communication
Q3: What does success look like to you?	Mutual respect of shared resource; Building sustained relationships between groups	Informed; education	Allow reasonable frequency of events per lake/per season	Quality communication = success
Q4: What has changed that has apparently yielded a shift in those relationships?	Lack of understanding of if tournaments are increasing, technology (boats) are becoming bigger and how property owner demographics are changing	Informed	Development pressures	Awareness of how social media has altered quality of relationships between groups

Phase 2: Workshop

In phase 2, lake association representatives and tournament organizers and anglers participated together in a 2-h hybrid (virtual and in-person) workshop at a community center in the Rideau Lakes area in eastern Ontario to (1) collaboratively identify avenues for cooperation (as an expansion to exploratory focus groups in phase 1), (2) offer relationship-building opportunities between historically conflicting groups, and (3) influence future interactions in a positive way. Virtual group interviews can be useful to improve access and ensure diversity among the participants (e.g., immunocompromised, people who cannot travel, disparate geographic regions) and reduce travel time and physical or emotional burden on the participants (Rupert et al., 2017); thus, a hybrid format was selected to support the participation of as many individuals as possible. A total of eight lake association members and nine tournament anglers and organizers participated in the phase 2 workshop that occurred in 2023. All but one tournament representative participated virtually, whereas all of the lake association members were physically present. The groups were given 20 min to discuss three different prompts in smaller “breakout” groups with a mix of participants representing each group, followed by a 10-min review of their responses with the whole group occurring after each discussion prompt. The prompts were identified from the earlier focus groups and focused on issues that were of mutual concern to both groups. The prompts were as follows:

1. How do we improve congestion concerns in a shared space?
2. How do we overcome communication challenges between groups?
3. What does success look like for you?

At the end of the workshop, all of the participants gathered for a final discussion that included a summary of points from each group and an open-share period that lasted approximately 20 min. Qualitative response data from open-ended questions discussed in the phase 2 workshop were compiled by the lead researcher. Written notes that were documented by six researchers and audio recordings that were taken from both breakout groups were transcribed by one member of the team. The transcribed responses for each question were qualitatively analyzed with inductive thematic coding (Thomas, 2006). Themes were identified inductively through summarization and grouping of major points that were brought up by the two user groups. Codes were created by identifying recurring themes among all response data and then added inductively during further analysis. This process was completed multiple times until the final list of coded themes was established.

Results

Phase 1

From the focus groups in phase 1, we identified conflicts from both user groups and learned about how these conflicts evolved and how lake associations and tournament organizers view success going forward. The following four themes were identified in phase 1:

1. **Lack of mutual understanding**, highlighting where there is a lack of understanding
2. **Historical change to group relations**, highlighting experiences of each group that have led to or feed into the conflict(s)
3. **User-group tipping point**, highlighting the direct causes of the conflicts
4. **Lack of communication**, highlighting the lack of communication between groups

Lack of mutual understanding and lack of communication

The two user groups had conflicting experiences surrounding tournaments. It was apparent that there was a lack of mutual understanding between both property owners and tournament angler groups (for full list of themes and summarized responses from phase 1, see Table 1). From the perspective of property owners (within lake associations) in the focus group, tournaments are not contributing financially to the community or supporting local conservation efforts, adding to a negative perception of them on eastern Ontario lakes. Additionally, there are concerns with tournament anglers being unaware of “best fishing practices” (e.g., reducing air exposure time and handling; LaRochelle et al., 2026), thus causing perceived damage to the fish populations. Property owners have long been worried about increased fishing pressure and other ecologically damaging consequences, such as the spread of invasive species. Additionally, they have long been worried about increasing tournament participation and frequencies that exacerbate boat launch congestion, boat speed and noise issues (which contribute to disturbance especially early in the morning as well as potential safety concerns), and the proximity of fishing to docks (a privacy and safety concern). The tournament anglers, however, were confident that most tournament participants avoid heavily populated areas and docks and are using several boat launches rather than congesting a single one. Tournament anglers’ focus group participants perceived that many of the conflicts that arise are based on a lack of understanding of tournament practices and their effects on bass. Both sides agree that there needs to be better mutual understanding of motivations, perceptions that are better rooted in empirical evidence, and improvement on the currently disjointed communication to improve waterway congestion and safety through education and collaborative action plans.

Some areas of cooperation were identified between the user groups. Lake association representatives were concerned about the frequency of tournaments and how they are run with respect to angling practices (i.e., fish handling) and central weigh-in practices (stockpiling of thousands of released fish in one area), perpetuating the notion that tournament anglers are causing harm to fish health and the stability of wild fish populations. Additionally, these representatives want boat identifiers so that anglers who do not respect shared spaces (e.g., fishing very close to property owners’ docks or retaining walls) can be reported to tournament organizers. The lake association representatives were keen to work with anglers to facilitate increased capacity at boat launches and better enforce best practices. From the perspective of tournament anglers/organizers, there seemed to be a

misperception that tournaments are held often on each water body, which differs from the actual number of tournaments that occur on each water body annually. There seems to be emphasis among both groups about the need for mutual respect in shared spaces and limiting the number of events that take place on each lake annually to provide opportunities for diverse lake users to enjoy the shared resource. This can be improved through education on both sides and collaborative discussions to determine the frequency of annual tournaments and the dates on which those events occur. For example, it was determined that sharing dates and locations up to a year in advance would provide more time for lake associations to plan events (e.g., sailing regattas) during periods when tournaments do not occur.

Both user groups commented on what successful conflict resolution could look like between lake associations and tournament anglers and organizers. Lake association representatives want to be able to build sustained relationships with tournament organizations that include respectful treatment of property owners and the fish involved (e.g., changes from central weigh-ins to catch–weigh–release formats), reasonable frequency of events per lake, and acknowledgment of open and direct communication about concerns (e.g., how to directly reach tournament organizers about undesirable practices). Tournament anglers and organizers see success as continuing tournament practices without large pushback from local groups and the media, being respectful of each other, reducing the negative perceptions of disturbance by bass boats, and understanding that a few “bad” anglers who may have upset waterfront property owners do not speak for or represent the entirety of the tournament scene or the other tournament organizers. Additionally, education, focus group, and collaborative efforts can make visible the good that tournaments are doing for the local communities, such as exposing individuals to the outdoors, promoting gender equality in fishing, and donating to local food banks (outside of the fishing space). Tournament organizers also want governments (mostly municipal but some provincial) to provide better services and facilities, which may, in turn, help with some of the concerns that are shared by the lake associations, even if that means setting and limiting the number of tournaments per site so that proper resources can be allocated to make sure that those fewer tournaments are successful.

Historical changes to group relations and user group tipping points

Relative to periods approximately 20 years ago when tournament organizers and lake associations actively collaborated on fish conservation initiatives, recent efforts in that respect have been negligible (Cooke, personal observations). Both groups stated that the changes in the relationship over time were due to a complex variety of factors, including the evolution of societal and demographic characteristics of the respective groups. For example, lake association representatives perceive that the number of events has increased; fishing technology has gotten better, resulting in more exploited wild fish populations; and there is a growing population in the area, leading to more property owners being exposed and affected by tournaments and tournament practices. Tournament anglers and organizers

are seeing changes, with individuals being less interested with fishing and fishing practices, more populated shorelines exacerbating the perception of increased congestion, changes in technology increasing boat speeds, and changes to the amount of dedicated anglers. The tournament organizers stated that the frequency of tournament events has actually decreased over the years rather than increased (although we were unable to corroborate that). Furthermore, participants from both sides reported that social media has admittedly changed the landscape of conflict. For example, the public may now be increasingly aware of negative practices (e.g., out-of-season harvest) by some anglers, and these negative perceptions have a quick platform to grow. On the tournament side, incorrect perceptions (e.g., that tournaments kill fish) sometimes become viral on the Internet, which puts more pressure on these anglers and organizers. Overall, the evolution of tournaments, technology and equipment, and shoreline development have escalated the level conflict and pressure between groups.

Phase 2

Three discussion topics were explored based on the themes that were identified during phase 1 of the focus group discussions (Figure 1). As phase 2 was focused on building avenues for future collaboration, these questions overlapped with the questions that were posed to separate groups in phase 1 as highly relevant discussion points.

Improving congestion

Several suggestions were made to improve issues of congestion at boat launches and on the lake during tournaments, including suggestions targeting tournament organizers. For example, it was suggested that the tournament formats could change to stagger boats (staggered blastoff times, “lines-in” event format, or staggered weigh-in format). Other actions were directed at dealing with governmental parties, from municipal to federal government jurisdictions. Another example was suggesting that Parks Canada, an environmental regulator on the waters that are part of the Rideau Canal Waterway, could limit large overlapping tournaments or other events through permitting. The governmental bodies could also explore zoning various areas of water for different recreational or protective (e.g., freshwater protected areas, fish sanctuaries) purposes. Municipalities could also improve boat launch facilities (by increasing area for vehicles) and increase parking spaces.

Communication

Communication challenges between different user groups can hinder the ability to resolve conflicts. Issues with communication stemming from a lack of direct communication between lake associations (more specifically, individual property owners) and tournament organizers and an inability to anticipate when tournaments will occur throughout the season were identified in phase 1 and further discussed in phase 2. Current scheduling for tournaments is available on the websites of various event networks as well as through Parks Canada and the OMNR, yet they are not on the websites of local lake associations. Communication of event dates, number of boats, and contact information for event organizers in advance of the fishing season could help alleviate confusion, frustrations, and

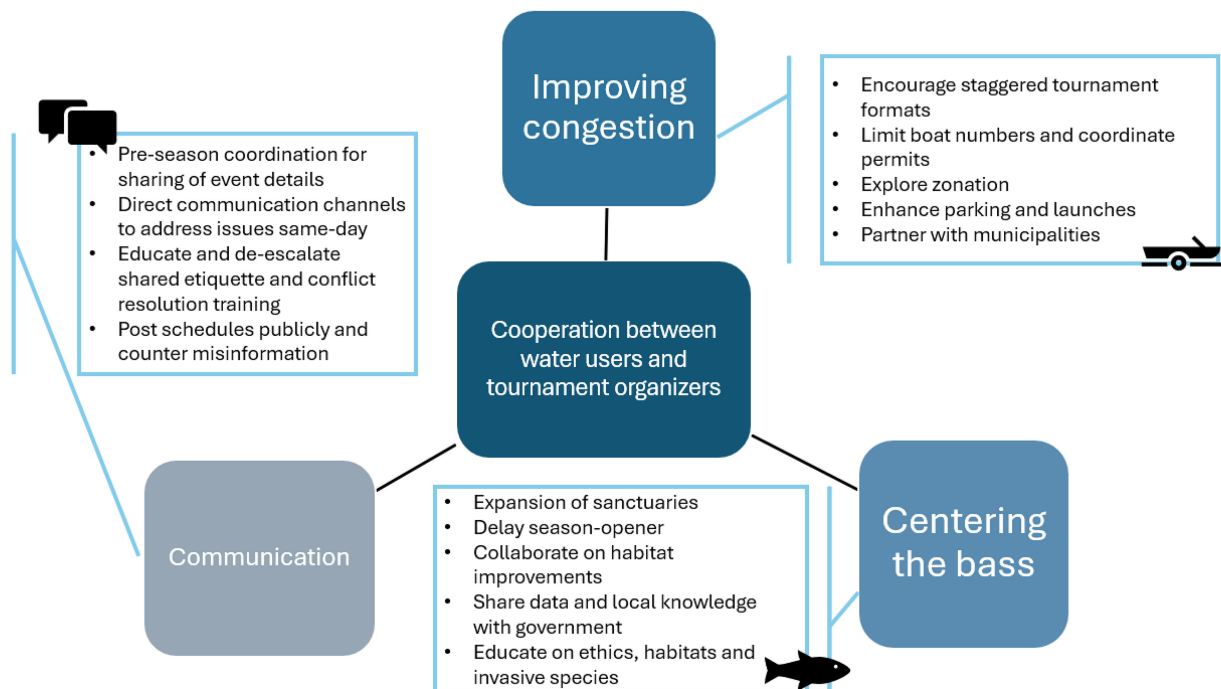


Figure 1 Potential ideas and recommendations put forth in a combined workshop for lake associations, tournament organizers, and anglers.

misinformation that occur through the negative social media “echo chamber.” Direct contact between property owners and tournament organizers can also alleviate concerns on the day of the tournament through direct reporting of issues to tournament organizers. Furthermore, guidelines, etiquette code of conducts, and deescalation techniques should be public on tournament websites and shared with lake association representatives prior to the fishing season.

Centering the bass

Both groups identified broader scale visions (education, regulatory actions, collaborative projects) of what success could look like in terms of protecting bass for collective benefit going forward. In general, some actions on which both groups could collaborate include education on the benefits of size-selective harvest, further restriction of fishing during the spawning season, shoreline naturalization (e.g., revegetation), fish habitat enhancement, and invasive species control while using platforms to improve the lack of communication, understanding, and data sharing between government entities and local communities.

Discussion

The results of this study confirm what we have seen and heard through social media, media outlets, and personal communications in eastern Ontario. There has been an extensive recent history of conflict between tournament organizers, anglers, and other recreational lake users in eastern Ontario, particularly on high-traffic water bodies for both anglers and property owners. In more recent years, this conflict has narrowed to mostly tournament anglers and property owners. In future work, this conversation can also include other recreational lake users and recreational anglers at large. This series of focus

groups and the workshop represent the first recent attempt to bring these user groups together to work toward a solution and highlights a dire need for relationship building in addition to ongoing dialogue to mitigate these conflicts. Such efforts will require time. In this study, we documented specific areas of conflict and shared concerns that included issues pertaining to space use and congestion of water bodies and boat launch areas as well as perceptions and misconceptions about the tournament angling community in general. We also analyzed the actions that were suggested by the participants that could be taken to build communication and trust among groups, a building block for alleviating future conflicts of this nature.

Conflicts throughout the fisheries space are common and well documented, whether they be between commercial fishers and recreational anglers (e.g., Boucquey, 2017) or within recreational angling groups (Arlinghaus, 2007; Bower et al., 2014; Zhang, Yeung, et al., 2026). Although there are some published research examining conflicts between water-based recreation users (Brockington et al., 2026; Gramann & Burdge, 1981; Kainzinger et al., 2015), the exploration of conflict between recreational angling and shoreline property owners has been vastly understudied despite anecdotal evidence of the persistent conflict between these groups. The tournaments themselves provide an interesting case of conflicts that arise between different recreational groups. Bass fishing is a popular activity throughout North America, with the popularity of tournaments increasing (Detmer et al., 2020) despite reports of decreasing popularity of recreational fishing by a Canadian angling survey (Fisheries and Oceans Canada, 2019). In a survey across 62 Canadian and U.S. agencies, Kerr and Kamke (2003) identified some of the same social issues that we identified in our focus group study, those being property owner issues with lake and boat launch congestion and noise and boat speeds, aligning with other studies in this field (e.g.,

Bergman et al., 2022). Boat-related congestion is linked to property owners' concerns for safety given the perception of increased motor traffic, aligning with other studies that report animosity between motorized and nonmotorized water-based recreation users (Lime, 1977). Safety concerns are particularly salient after a high-profile accident that occurred at a bass tournament in April 2025 in Alabama that led to the death of three individuals (ESPN News Service, 2025). Insurance companies that underwrite such events may increasingly play a role in determining acceptable practices in black bass tournaments. In our study, we also identified tournament anglers fishing near docks as a main concern among shoreline property owners despite the legal autonomy of the anglers to use the waters. Tournament angling will likely continue to breed various forms of social conflict, as these issues are likely not unique to the eastern Ontario context and are not singular instances. In addition, natural shorelines and access to water bodies are increasingly being lost to private development (Smardon, 1988); thus, the intersection between property owners and anglers will presumably escalate. Our understanding of the subtle issues that surround the conflict between tournament organizers and property owners needs to vastly improve to reduce conflicts between these recreational groups.

Highlighting needs for communication, value alignment, and changes in intergroup perceptions

The results of this study show that resolving conflict begins with recognizing, communicating, and bringing issues to the table as well as a good dose of patience. Communities will inevitably experience various forms of conflict, especially in the case of shared resources (Moura & Teixeira, 2009). Despite this, conflicts can be an instrument for social change (Dahlet et al., 2021) given that both communication and conflicts are components of decision making (J. W. Kennedy, 2000). We see in this study that some level of conversation can be had about long-standing issues if there is an avenue of discussion and communication where individuals come together and collaborate. Despite that, some respondents noted that informal avenues such as social media can “muddy the waters” and can increase polarization, misinformation, and distrust among groups, emphasizing the importance of having a mediator or facilitator (Kubin & Von Sikorski, 2021). Nonetheless, communication and consultation remain two of the most important aspects of effective cooperation in fisheries (Bower et al., 2014; Moura & Teixeira, 2009) and failures in the process of communication between groups can strain relations and inhibit the ability to come to an effective solution (Kaplan & McCay, 2004). More broadly, comanagement in fisheries has been shown to successfully improve conflict situations, especially if there is redistribution of power and better allocation of resources established in collaboration with those managing the resource (Bennett et al., 2001; Pomeroy et al., 2007). In our study, we see calls for more direct lines of communication between property owners, lake association representatives, and tournament groups that allow property owners to better reach tournament organizers and for tournament organizers to address issues that are caused by a few problematic individuals (e.g., unsafe boat operation, being rude to property

owners). This would help create a pluralist situation that forms a community identity of sorts where individuals strive to create objectives that would benefit all groups through two-way communication, a communication plan, and careful relationship building (Cooke, Rytwinski, et al., 2020; Moura & Teixeira, 2009).

Prior to building collaboration and communication, the alignment of values between the two groups should be considered (Lynn Fitzpatrick, 2007), although that might not always be necessary, as values can be difficult to change (Koebele & Crow, 2023; Neuteleers & Hugé, 2021). Values are the building blocks that guide individual behavior (Colins & Chippendale, 2002), and if two groups are misaligned in their values, it is unlikely that they can collaborate to reduce conflicts (Jehn & Mannix, 2001; Lynn Fitzpatrick, 2007). Interestingly, many of the conflicts seen among these user groups likely arise through social differences over a shared natural resource (cottagers and anglers represent different perspectives on how the lake should be used) and, thus, put these groups at fundamentally different positions with respect to how they value the lake-user interface. Conflicts are then exacerbated through close interpersonal conflicts and exposure to each other over long periods (see Vaske et al., 1995). Regardless, these groups do align on the values of mutual respect and communication, which are common for reducing conflict and team building across disciplines (e.g., Martini et al., 2013; Tingvold & Munkejord, 2021). That being said, there may be an opportunity here to reduce conflicts even if values are not necessarily aligned, as there is evidence that groups with different values may be able to find common goals (Koebele & Crow, 2023; Neuteleers & Hugé, 2021). In the 2023 study by Koebele and Crow (2023), they found that although two groups may be misaligned on their values, if they can create multipurpose policy or strategies (thus benefiting both groups), these groups may eventually view their goals as less misaligned with shared common ground.

Our study was a preliminary attempt to identify common values between two differing user groups, which broadly encompasses the ideas of respect and intergroup communication, although ultimately, more work needs to be done to identify shared and divergent values. Further conflict resolution efforts also need to attend to intergroup perceptions and attitudes and focus efforts on individuals who are willing to listen and consider diverse perspectives to avoid confrontation and individuals from doubling down on their own beliefs (known as the “backfire effect”; Swire-Thompson et al., 2020, 2022; Trevors et al., 2016). The individuals who participated in our study have different perceptions and beliefs about the nature of tournaments in eastern Ontario (the idea of increased lake congestion vs. the reported amounts of tournaments decreasing). People often formulate these beliefs based on the influence of others within their circles and the values they share (Clark et al., 2016; Levin, 2013). Individuals within one user group may also conversely use their preexisting perceptions and judgements about the other user group to determine whether information that is obtained is genuine or trustworthy (Nguyen et al., 2017; Young et al., 2016), which can inhibit attempts to provide education and facilitate collaboration (Young et al., 2020). These frustrations between

groups can also heighten negative emotions that may further complicate their ability to effectively communicate and decide on beneficial solutions (J. Kennedy & Vining, 2007). This may explain the continued conflict between user groups despite ongoing efforts for collaboration. Although these themes were not directly explored in our study, this could be a potential next step for future attempts at collaboration.

Complexity of governance in conflict resolution

Our study also highlighted the inherently complex nature of fisheries and recreation themselves. Recreational fisheries are well-documented socioecological systems that weave together a number of stakeholders, natural resources, and their interactions with each other (Arlinghaus et al., 2017; García et al., 2019). Often, surface-level issues and conflicts are actually multifaceted in nature and are the manifestation of deeper underlying tensions. This study is a stepping stone that can be used to cross boundaries, which is necessary to move toward shared objectives and solutions between different actors (Cooke & Arlinghaus, 2024). This is similar to concepts and lessons learned from knowledge coproduction and comanagement systems, where a failure to bridge stakeholder viewpoints and reliance on larger regulatory bodies (like government) can hinder progress toward agreeable action (see Cvitanovic et al., 2016; Young et al., 2016). Building the bridge to the coproduction of effective, respectful, and inclusive solutions takes time (Cooke, Nguyen, et al., 2021; García et al., 2019) and goes beyond preliminary focus groups and workshops. In that vein, the individuals in our study agree that success would look like both groups working together to come to solutions, although the parties likely overlooked the fact that these relationships can take considerable amounts of time—longer than a single workshop—and effort to build. In addition, the issues covered here span topics that are the responsibility of several different levels of government (townships that are responsible for parking and some boat launches; the OMNR, which is responsible for fisheries management; federal bodies such as Parks Canada, which has legal authority over the Rideau Canal Waterway; and Transport Canada, which has authority over issues related to boating). Indeed, Bergman et al. (2022) presented a “horrendogram” that documents the presence of multiscale/multilevel governance in the Rideau Canal Waterway system, highlighting that the current governance structure can be, at best, considered “patchwork” and could carry out more effective management for both people and wildlife if they shifted to be more coordinated and inclusive (note that not all of the lake associations that were represented in our study were from the Rideau Canal Waterway). Although there are multiple governance bodies that are involved in managing tournament fishing, none have explicit responsibility for tournaments. The provincial government has been rather silent about tournaments and does not require any formal permitting if the tournament event does not possess the fish for subsequent transport. This highlights a paradox and the importance of finding a balance between using some aspects of government to aid in issues (e.g., Bennett et al., 2001; Pomeroy et al., 2007) and ensuring that government involvement does not slow down progress (Cooke & Arlinghaus, 2024).

There are also fundamental underlying challenges that may be more difficult to address. As stated by one respondent, the demographic of lake visitors has changed over time, with more “urbanites” owning properties on lakes and embracing a more protectionist perspective about sharing the lake with others. This influx of individuals from urban areas (where fishing can be less popular and/or less accessible) probably contributes to negative attitudes toward fishing (Arlinghaus et al., 2012). In developed countries like Canada, an unknown—yet existing—proportion of the general nonangling public holds negative attitudes toward fishing, especially if it is for sport, due to shifts from an anthropocentric to a biocentric view (Arlinghaus et al., 2021). Participation in recreational fishing has also decreased (Fisheries & Oceans Canada, 2019) due to these biocentric view shifts and the availability of other nonfishing activities for people to use as an escape from reality (Driver & Knopf, 1976; Fedler & Ditton, 1994; Manfredo, 2008). Thus, there is conflict between angling groups and those who enjoy fishing and people who use the lakes for other forms of recreation and relaxation. As a result, the conflict that we see between the user groups in this study may be related to conflicting ideas of recreational fishing, angling, and catch-and-release angling and is likely to continue unless there is alignment on some aspects of fishing as a concept.

Importantly, regardless of group values and perceptions on the proliferation of tournaments, the truth is that anglers are getting better at catching fish through technological advances, increasing pressure and putting our fisheries resources at potential risk (Cooke, Venturelli, et al., 2021; Cooke et al., 2025; Post et al., 2002; Thurstan et al., 2018). Knowing this, the protection of the environment could be a place of alignment between these groups. These groups clearly include the protection of bass as a major theme identified from phase 1 and phase 2 of this study. The idea of “centering the bass” and protecting fishery health could become a major point of convergence and discussion. One idea that was brought up in discussions included better education on best angling practices and angler ethics. The former of these explores ideas that would benefit the health of the fish, which has been extensively studied in the context of catch-and-release science (Cooke, Abrams, et al., 2020; LaRochelle et al., 2026). Angler ethics (for example, fishing away from property owners’ docks) is much more subjective and requires a deep discussion between groups. A way that these groups may begin to work collaboratively is to focus on habitat protection and restoration. Habitat protection may be the most useful tool to improve the proliferation of freshwater species (Lapointe et al., 2014), whereas restoration can result in mixed outcomes for freshwater species (Cooke et al., 2023). Regardless, this seems to be an opportunity for collaboration that benefits both the angler (through increased health of wild fish populations) and lake users (through healthier ecosystems) and could highlight positive outcomes of anglers working in conservation. Additionally, the Rideau Lakes (a central portion of the Rideau Canal Waterway), with their existing and proposed freshwater sanctuaries (see Bergman et al., 2025; Philipp et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2024; Zolderdo et al., 2024), provide a great opportunity for expansion and collaboration

for the protection of black bass in eastern Ontario and could serve as a springboard for further discussion down the line.

Conclusion

Our findings demonstrate that although there is some alignment about the issues of congestion and high traffic due to tournaments, these user groups are still mired by various forms of misperceptions and mistrust because of the lack of communication and failure to center black bass as a species of mutual interest. Although there were talks of further education and more direct lines of communication, there remain challenges to the groups agreeing on the controversial topic of tournaments. This research comes at an important time, when the popularity of tournaments has increased, our ability to catch fish has drastically improved, and the future of the black bass populations is unknown (Zhang, Philipp, et al., 2026). Although the issues remain complex, the rise of conflict and the beginning stages of cooperation showed some hope that these issues may be resolved in time.

Epilogue

Following the joint workshop (phase 2), the coalition of lake associations conferred and determined that there was insufficient progress on addressing their concerns in an expedient manner. They reached out to our team in November 2023 (and copied representatives of the tournament participants) to share their ongoing concerns and withdrawal from future engagement led by our team. One factor that was cited in their decision to withdraw from future engagement was that only one tournament representative participated in person at the joint workshop, which was viewed by some as an indicator of lack of engagement and interest in working toward a solution. For that reason, we suggest that future efforts be entirely in person or entirely virtual to remove perceived differences in engagement (see above for our reasoning for embracing a hybrid approach). There was also an expectation (based perhaps on our failure to emphasize that these issues take time to address) that the issue related to fishing near docks would be resolved expediently (i.e., tournament organizers would agree and put in rules to prohibit such activity), whereas from our perspective, it is perhaps one of the more challenging topics to address given that fishing near docks is legally enshrined. We also emphasized the importance of patience and the reality that it was unlikely that complex issues identified by both user groups would be resolved with a single meeting.

The lake association representatives have proceeded with an alternate path that involves lobbying local municipal governments to embrace various regulatory actions that are related to tournament access. Given that lake association members are also taxpayers, it was their perspective that they are entitled to privacy while they are at their properties, which was not maintained with fishing near their docks. Municipal governments own some of the boat ramps and parking and could require tournament organizers to include tournament rules that prohibit fishing near docks. If tournament participants fail to do so, then boat access and parking could be restricted for future tournaments, which could potentially lead to conflict between municipal and provincial governments. In June 2024, some local municipal

governments decided to send letters to tournament organizers asking them to embrace such etiquette voluntarily without them having to restrict access and parking. To our knowledge, those efforts did not yield any change, but efforts to advance those activities continue as recently as May of 2026.

Efforts and opportunities to identify areas of mutual interest (e.g., fish habitat protection, water quality) and work collaboratively have not yet been successful. We anticipate that despite our efforts, this conflict will persist for some time, although perhaps another group of mediators could renew relationships and be more successful in helping the situation improve in the future. There is a desperate need for small wins before it is possible to tackle some of the more complex and controversial topics. We suggest that future research evaluate aspects of entitlement to resources, particularly with respect to privacy, including how it varies among individuals and groups.

Data availability

Data are available upon reasonable request notwithstanding various restrictions given ethical requirements.

Ethics statement

This research followed all ethics protocols outlined by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (CUREB-B Project #118366, phase 1; CUREB Project #120062, phase 2).

Funding

This work was supported by the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada via a Discovery Grant to S.J.C.

Conflicts of interest

S.J.C. has received funding from various lake associations in eastern Ontario for research on a variety of topics, including black bass. He is also an angler (and fished black bass tournaments as a teenager) and works closely with the recreational fishing sector, including through partnerships with fishing tournament organizers for accessing fish for tagging. He has never received funding from tournament organizers or anglers.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge Dr. Vivian M. Nguyen at Carleton University for important comments and revisions to the manuscript. We would also like to acknowledge various anonymous lake associations and angler and tournament groups for their cooperation during the research stages of this project. We proudly declare that artificial intelligence tools were not used in the writing or preparation of this manuscript.

Conceptualization—J.Z., A.A., S.J.C.; data curation—J.Z., A.A., L.L., J.N.B.; formal analysis—J.Z., A.A.; investigation—J.Z., A.A., S.J.C.; methodology—J.Z., A.A., C.B., N.Y., S.J.C., validation—J.Z., A.A., L.L., J.N.B., C.B., N.Y., C.D.S., S.J.C.; writing (draft and review)—J.Z., A.A., L.L.; writing (editing)—J.Z., A.A., L.L., J.N.B., C.B., N.Y., C.D.S., S.J.C.; visualization—J.Z., A.A.; funding acquisition—S.J.C.; supervision—S.J.C.

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