

Morris Ferry Boat and Bank Fishing Access: Revived and Alive Again!

Woods Reservoir is a 3,660-acre impoundment in southern middle TN, owned and operated by the US Air Force (USAF) and Arnold Engineering Development Center (AEDC). The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency (TWRA) manages the fishery and enforces boating and fishing regulations. Woods Reservoir was impounded in 1952, and the first dock and fish camp, Morris Ferry, was established in 1954. Woods provided the first reservoir fishery in southern middle Tennessee, and it was great fishing! Largemouth bass, smallmouth bass, white crappie and channel catfish were abundant. A hatchery-supported muskellunge fishery was also established. Pictures of huge fish and big stringers lined the walls at the Morris Ferry bait shop. It bustled with fishermen and big fish tales.

On Labor Day, 2008, after 54 years of fishing tradition and memories, the USAF closed Morris Ferry due to disrepair. The public was outraged as they had lost an important fishing landmark. Their sentiments and frustrations were conveyed to elected government officials.

In 2010, the USAF, AEDC, TWRA, elected government officials and Friends of Morris Ferry met with the goal to reopen Morris Ferry to the public. We started with the idea to build one fishing pier. A much grander plan, dubbed as the Morris Ferry Boat Access and Bank Fishing Park, transpired. TWRA took the lead in its development using Sport Fish Restoration funding (\$150,000). Monetary assistance (\$75,000) and in-kind labor were received from the USAF, Franklin County Highway Department (FCHD), Franklin County Sheriff's Department (FCSD), Robertson Vaughn Construction (RVC) and Boy Scouts of America (BSA).

We wanted this project to be unique and have the ability to bring back excitement and enthusiasm for fishing. We had an opportunity to attract traditional anglers and recruit new anglers of all demographics. To accomplish this, we wanted to give bank anglers many of the same opportunities as boat anglers. This would include diverse fishing habitats, including deep water, an assortment of fish attractors and a large area that would require many hours to fish completely.

The first step was to remove the dilapidated boat dock structures and old office building. In January 2011, TWRA's engineering crew performed this task with heavy equipment and large boats. Following demolition, they stabilized eroded banks with rip rap. The remaining Morris Ferry site included a peninsula with a boat access ramp and parking area. The two embayments on each side of the peninsula were to be developed for bank fishing access. The larger embayment is approximately 8 acres and the smaller estimated at 4 acres.

In the spring of 2011, two fishing piers constructed on wood pilings were built on both points at the mouth of the larger embayment. One L-shaped pier extends 80 ft from the bank with 50 ft of fishing access at the end. The other was slightly smaller. Funding for both piers was provided by TWRA and USAF. RVC, a local contractor inspired by the project, constructed them for \$75,000.

TWRA fishery crews constructed a 240- x 10-ft bridge, of the same wood materials as the piers, to connect the opposite sides near the back of the embayment. This bridge was designed with fishing stalls allowing it to function as a third fishing pier.

In the summer of 2011, the FCHD cost shared with TWRA to construct a paved, greenway path approximately ½ mile in length. The two fishing piers at the mouth of the embayment and the fishing bridge were connected by this paved path. Smaller fishing platforms have been constructed by TWRA along the length of this path. Fish attractors line the perimeter of the coves and surround the piers. They include large rock piles and concrete culverts to attract catfish, stake beds and turnstiles to attract crappie, and PVC stump buckets for bass and bluegill, just to list a few.

In the fall of 2011, the BSA constructed a ½-mile mulched fishing path, bordered by railroad ties, that extends along a bank at the end of the paved greenway path. Twenty five of the old dock structures, 12- x 12-ft platforms, were left within casting distance from the bank providing excellent fishing structures from this trail. They have also been enhanced by an assortment of fish attractors.

The old boat access ramp was reconstructed with a new concrete ramp by TWRA's engineering crew. It was lengthened to accommodate larger boats. In the fall of 2012, TWRA and the USAF cost-shared to add two courtesy docks, one on each side of the ramp. TWRA has constructed concrete ADA parking sites for both the access ramp and bank fishing park.

Community involvement continues to date. The BSA constructed picnic tables and benches along the fishing trails. The FCSD maintains the area by mowing and garbage pick-up through their prison work force. On June 8, 2013, National Free Fishing Day, TWRA hosted a second annual kid's fishing event. Attendance more than doubled from last year to 1,000 attendees. TWRA stocked 1,300 pounds of catfish in the two embayments. Block nets were used to contain them for the event and the remainder of National Free Fishing Week. Community support, participation, contributions, and volunteers made this event a tremendous success.

Additional phases of the project are planned for summer 2013. The USAF and TWRA will again cost-share for a pavilion designed to accommodate fishing tournament weigh-ins.

Community support and enthusiasm for this entire project has been incredible. Its transformation from a dilapidated, depressing, and unusable site condemned in 2008 to a state-of-the-art bank fishing park and boat access area that is again bustling with fishermen of all demographics has been an inspiration to all. Morris Ferry is a glowing example of how the Sport Fish Restoration program can create an enhanced quality of life bringing immense happiness, community involvement, and support for state wildlife agencies through improved fishing opportunities.