

# The Illinois Steward Readership Survey

Gail Snowdon

*The Illinois Steward* evolved from one that encouraged ethical land management by forest landowners to one that discusses issues of stewardship. Its editors wanted to know who the current subscribers are and if the magazine is meeting the readers' stewardship information needs.

A sample of 241 subscribers were selected for 20-minute phone interviews. Results indicated the typical reader of *The Illinois Steward* is a college-educated male who resides in Illinois. He is employed in a field outside of agriculture or conservation. He owns a home and more than five acres in a rural area. He likes articles in *The Illinois Steward* with a historical perspective. He enjoys reading about conservation efforts that have worked for others and about Illinois natural history. His ideas about stewardship do not necessarily agree with other readers' ideas.

## Introduction

*The Illinois Steward* was first published in 1992 as a cooperative effort of the University of Illinois Department of Forestry, the Illinois Stewardship Advisory Committee, and the Illinois Council on Forestry Development. In summer 1994, 5,000 people/or offices received the magazine. Nine hundred-sixty-nine of them were listed as paid subscribers. A subscription is \$10 per year for the quarterly. The magazine has no advertising.

At that time, several Illinois state agencies purchased a total of 550 copies per issue. The Illinois Council on Forestry Development purchased 600 copies per issue. Complimentary copies are sent to the Illinois legislators, 553 Illinois public libraries, 720

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Illinois high and middle school libraries, and about 700 Nature of Illinois Foundation members.

The magazine's mission is to:

1. Help readers formulate their personal stewardship philosophies.
2. Provide information to help readers meet their stewardship objectives.
3. Foster mutual understanding of stewardship among all parties involved.

Mike Bolin, a managing editor of the magazine, defines stewardship as "caring for something you do not own, which has been entrusted to you." Responsibility is the underlying foundation of stewardship. Stewardship of the land can best be summed up by a statement of Chief Seattle, "We do not inherit the land from our ancestors, we borrow it from our children."

The original goals of the magazine were to bring together various groups such as the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, Illinois Free Farm Committee, and NRCS interested in forestry; and to help landowners manage forests ethically. Across time, the editors expanded the content of the magazine from articles of primary interest to forest landowners, to ones of interest to farmers, then to general landowners, and now to people interested in land stewardship. The titles of two articles show how the focus of the magazine has changed. A how-to article aimed at woodlot owners, *Managing Your Woodlot for Wildlife* by Kathy Andrews, appeared in the premier issue of the magazine. Promotional efforts were sent to people who expressed interest in Illinois conservation programs and the University of Illinois Department of Forestry programs.

While the magazine continued to have how-to and forestry-related articles, other articles about stewardship issues such as *Illinois' White-Tails — Too Much Stewardship?* by Alan Woolf were aimed at a wider readership. Promotional efforts were aimed at farmers with agronomic crops and Illinois residents interested in land stewardship.

Due to the efforts to expand the content of the magazine, the editors questioned whether it was possible to provide balanced coverage of preservation, conservation, restoration, and sustainable production. Were they meeting their readers' stewardship information needs? If the primary intended audience was farmers interested in production-land stewardship, would the magazine be focused too narrowly to attract a sufficient number of subscribers

to be viable? If the primary intended audience was people interested in land stewardship, would the magazine run the risk of being perceived as a nature or environmental magazine and lose its unique niche? If the intended audience was people interested in outdoor recreational land use, would it be perceived as an outdoor recreation magazine again losing its niche as a stewardship magazine?

The editors wanted audience information to help them increase the number of paid subscribers by finding people who would be likely subscribers to *The Illinois Steward*. According to Jordan (1992), people who buy magazines through the mail and have demographic profiles and interests similar to a magazine's subscriber demographic profile are more likely to respond to a direct mail promotion for that magazine. The editors wanted to identify the other magazines' subscribers who were most like the paid subscribers of *The Illinois Steward*.

The readership demographic profile on *Audubon*, an environmental magazine, showed a college-educated, professional audience with about equal numbers of male and female readers living in nonrural areas. The readership profile on *Outdoor Life*, an outdoor recreation magazine, showed a predominantly blue-collar, male audience with high school education living in nonmetropolitan areas (Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc. [SMRI], 1993.) The demographic profile of Illinois farmers is predominately male, living in rural areas, and older than *Audubon* and *Outdoor Life* readers (U. S. Census, 1990). Was *The Illinois Steward* readership profile closer to *Audubon*, *Outdoor Life* or the Illinois farmer?

Finally, the editors wanted to know whether the magazine's extensive use of color photographs was enhancing or overshadowing the message. No previous readership surveys had been conducted. Understanding the demographics and readers' needs for stewardship information would help the editors focus their efforts in promotion and editorial content.

Objectives of the study were to:

1. Determine subscribers' perceptions of the magazine's content and appearance.
2. Determine whether subscribers have developed a personal stewardship ethic.
3. Determine readers' stewardship information needs.
4. Determine how much of the last issue was read.
5. Determine pass-along readership.

6. Identify other periodicals read by subscribers.
7. Identify the readers' demographics.

## Method

Phone interviews were conducted to encourage respondents to provide in-depth answers to key questions and to allow interviewers to ask for clarification when necessary. Phone interviews also allowed interviewers to use a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system (CATI) to input the responses directly into an electronic form for analysis. Phone interviews offered the advantage of quality control and cost efficiency (Lavrakas, 1993). The construction and order of questions were developed using Dillman's recommendations (1994).

A "yes/no" format was used to collect data on home and land ownership, article format, and pass-along readership. A category format was used for place of residence, age, educational level, and amount of the magazine read. An open-ended format was used for questions about topics read, increased coverage, magazines read, ideas about stewardship, and impressions of the content and appearance of *The Illinois Steward*.

Questions about pass-along readership and amount read were limited to the most recent issue read, to reduce the possibility of omission or creation of information in the responses (Dillon, Madden & Firtle, 1987).

Two-hundred-forty-one names were selected at random from a list of the paid subscribers who had been subscribers for at least six months prior to the survey. The sample size was chosen based on the recommendations of J. Robert Warmbrod (1967)<sup>(1)</sup> for a five percent margin of error.

Persons with listed phone numbers were mailed a card asking them to participate in a 15-minute phone interview. The 26 subscribers with no listed or working phone number were mailed letters describing the study and requesting their phone numbers. A subscriber who completed an interview received a one-copy extension to his/her subscription.

The interview was pilot tested with 16 subscribers not selected as part of the sample. As a result of the pilot, the article format question was revised. The responses to the list of seven formats showed a bias to the last formats mentioned. The question was changed to seven questions with the respondent answering "yes" or "no" to each format. With that format a number of respondents answered, "it depends." When they did, the interviewer followed up by asking them to clarify their answer.

## Results

One-hundred-eighty subscribers were interviewed at a response rate of 75 percent. Forty-four declined to be interviewed and three did not complete the interview. About one fourth of those who declined said they did not subscribe to or read *The Illinois Steward*. (Many subscriptions are sent to an office address with no individual named as the subscriber. The person answering the call did not read the magazine and was unable or unwilling to transfer the interviewer to someone in the office who did). Interviewers were unable to contact another 12 subscribers despite repeated attempts. The interviewers also were unable to reach an additional 13 subscribers because a gatekeeper refused to transfer the call to a subscriber or provide a time for a return call.

### General Profile

The typical reader of *The Illinois Steward* is a college-educated male who resides in rural Illinois. He is employed in a field outside of agriculture or conservation. He owns a home and more than five acres.

He subscribes to several magazines, especially outdoor magazines. He reads articles in *The Illinois Steward* with a historical perspective. He likes to read about conservation efforts that have worked for others and about Illinois natural history. Others who read his copies of *The Illinois Steward* include his wife and/or co-workers.

### Comparison of Demographics

Compared with the subscribers of *Audubon* and *Outdoor Life* (SMRI, 1993), *The Illinois Steward* respondents are older and more likely to be homeowners. They are more similar to *Audubon* subscribers than *Outdoor Life* subscribers in education, gender, and professional occupation. *The Illinois Steward* and *Outdoor Life* subscribers are more likely to live in rural areas. Table 1 gives details.

### Article Format

Respondents were asked what article formats they liked to read. Historical articles were the most popular (Table 2).

If a respondent replied "it depends" rather than "yes" or "no" when asked if he or she liked to read an article format, the interviewer asked for clarification. Whether or not a respondent liked a format depended most frequently on the article topic. Other conditions included: if the article was related to the magazine's mission for historical, biographical, and how-to articles; if additional sources of information were given for summary and basic articles; and if in-depth and how-to articles were not too technical.

### Amount Read

Seventy-six percent (137 respondents) recalled receiving the spring 1994 issue. Some respondents who did not recall receiving the spring issue said someone in their office might have received a copy, but they had not seen it. Of the 137 respondents who recalled receiving the spring issue, 53 read the entire issue and 52 read selected articles (Table 3).

The percentage of readers who read the entire issue was lower than the percentage who read all of *Audubon* (49%) and *Outdoor Life* (44%) (SMRI, 1993). The differences may be due to the way in which the questions were phrased. SMRI asks readers if they usually read the entire issue whereas *The Illinois Steward* respondents were asked if they had read the entire spring 1994 issue only.

### Pass-Along Readership

Virtually all of the 137 subscribers who recalled receiving the spring issue saved the issue, including the 13 percent who said they had not read it. The percentage of readers who saved *The Illinois Steward* was higher than the percentage who save *Audubon* (54%) or *Outdoor Life* (65%) (SMRI, 1993). In the SMRI studies respondents are qualified as readers of a magazine and later asked if they usually save issues of the magazine. They are not asked a filter question about receiving an issue prior to asking them if they saved the magazine.

**TABLE 1:**

*Comparison of Subscriber Demographics of Audubon, Outdoor Life, and The Illinois Steward*

Attribute	Magazine		
	<i>Audubon</i>	<i>Outdoor Life</i>	<i>The Illinois Steward</i>
Male	55%	83%	67%
Average age	43 years	38 years	47 years
Home ownership	79%	74%	91%
College education	48%	14%	82%
Professional occupation	24%	7%	50%
Live in rural area or small town (<10,000)	23%	44%	69%

Those who read the spring issue said someone in their household also read it, or they gave it to someone outside their home to read. Co-workers, colleagues, or spouses were the most frequent recipients of a copy of *The Illinois Steward*.

An average of 2.4 people read the spring 1994 issue of *The Illinois Steward*, besides the primary reader. An average of 2 people read *Audubon* in addition to the primary reader, and an average of 3.5 people read *Outdoor Life* in addition to the primary reader (SMRI, 1993). Again the differences may be due to the phrasing of questions. SMRI asks about pass-along readership in general; the interviewer asked about *The Illinois Steward* pass-along readership of the spring issue.

#### Magazines Read

If a person subscribes to one magazine, he or she often subscribes to several (Jordan, 1992). This was certainly true for the readers of *The Illinois Steward*. They subscribed to several types of magazines, including outdoor, travel, environmental, farm and other trade journals, gardening, general, popular science, country, and Illinois-focused. The category most frequently listed was outdoor. Many of the magazines named are known for their high-quality photography, such as *Life*, *National Geographic*, *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Sierra*, and *Garden Design*.

#### Perceptions of *The Illinois Steward*

The interview began with the question, "A friend sees *The Illinois Steward* in your home and asks what the magazine is. What do you

**TABLE 2:**  
*Readers' Reactions to Article Formats (n=180)*

Article format	Liked to read	It depends	Didn't like to read
Historical	85%	8%	7%
Basic overview	74%	17%	9%
How-to	73%	14%	13%
Personal perspective	73%	13%	15%
In-depth	61%	25%	14%
Summary	63%	22%	17%
Biographical	56%	27%	18%

say?" The goal was to obtain the respondent's overall impressions of the magazine. The editors were concerned that the magazine's high-quality photography might overshadow the text. If the respondent spoke of content only, the interviewer followed with a question about appearance; and vice versa.

Overall, the respondents emphasized the content over the appearance. Words used most frequently to describe the content of the magazine included: Illinois, conservation, forestry, trees, how to be a good steward, nature, and natural history. Nonforestry production-agriculture items were not mentioned.

Despite respondents describing the content first, they had glowing descriptions of the appearance when asked. Most of them noticed and appreciated the high-quality, interesting photographs. In brief, they described it as interesting, eye-catching, and "you just want to pick to it up."

#### Topics Read

In an open-ended question, respondents were asked what topics they liked to read. The most frequently stated topics were: all of them, a specific article about maple syrup, forestry, conservation, preservation, nature preserves, nature, plants and animals, prairies, trees, resource management and stewardship, preservation and conservation ideas that worked for others, and Illinois natural history.

#### More Coverage

Respondents were asked on which topics would they like to see more coverage in the magazine. The topics stated most frequently were: areas in Illinois to visit (especially ones nearby to the respondent), nature preserves, wildlife, preservation and conservation ideas that worked for others, and Illinois natural history. A few respondents mentioned production-agriculture topics.

**TABLE 3:**

*Amount of the Spring 1994 Issue Read by Respondents (n=137)*

Amount read	Respondents
Read the entire issue	39%
Read selected articles	38%
Glanced at the headlines and photos	10%
Didn't read it	13%

### **Ideas About Stewardship**

One goal of the magazine's editors was to have readers develop their own ideas about stewardship and translate their ideas into action. In each issue, in a personal perspective article, an individual who is actively involved in stewardship efforts writes about his or her ideas about stewardship and how he or she incorporates stewardship principles into daily living. The managing editors hoped the personal perspective articles would help readers think and develop their personal stewardship philosophies.

Respondents were asked if they read the personal perspective articles. Nearly three fourths (132) of the respondents read the personal perspective articles. Another 11 percent said they read them if they had sufficient time. Of those who read personal perspectives, three-fourths (114) found them helpful in developing their own stewardship ideas.

About 90 percent of the respondents shared their ideas about stewardship. The components of stewardship frequently mentioned were responsibility, obstacles, land use, and long-term implications. While these components were mentioned often, there was no consensus among the respondents. Frequently mentioned components of stewardship mentioned by respondents include:

**1. Land stewardship is the responsibility of everyone, landowners, and/or mine.**

"The people who are really making the changes are doing it because this is the right thing to do. It starts with the people in sustainable agriculture. From there, change goes on to industry, and the infrastructure can be rebuilt around that. What consumers want to buy affects what producers make."

"It's the responsibility of the local landowners to make an effort to preserve their land and conserve it for future generations."

"The prairies have been worked and farmed, and we are working to restore [them] to [their] native condition."

**2. The obstacles to stewardship were lack of resources, lack of knowledge by others, and/or government intervention.**

"I don't have much I can do by myself. I think it's a great idea, and I have great respect to those who have gone really into it. I wish I could do that, but time- and monetary-wise I can't."

"We wrestle with where you draw that line at our agency. Landowners don't always have the background to see the implications of their actions. There's an untapped base in private lands for timber production, and we're going to be in a mess. We need to get past the political tiptoeing of landowners' rights, and tell them their

consequences of action or inaction. Not force them to do anything, but inform them."

"As long as the government stays out of it, it's okay. I was in the Illinois stewardship [program], and I'm trying to get out of it 'cause I don't like the government's tentacles in my back."

**3. Stewardship is about land use for conservation, preservation, restoration and/or sustainable production.**

"The only way to make land sustainable is to properly manage it. It's not a preserve. It's what the community does ... It needs to have a scientific basis. The management you do can't be too costly or labor intensive."

"We should preserve as much open space, keep as much natural as we can. I've been endeavoring to do that."

**4. Stewardship is for future generations, those around us, and/or a "creator."**

"You're not around forever, and the land is. What you do affects your neighbors downwind and downstream."

"It is a matter of respect for the land, or your creator, or whatever you think is worthy."

"We are all here for a short while, and we should take care of it for those who are coming after us."

#### Comments

Many respondents appreciated being asked for their ideas. Many stated they enjoyed reading *The Illinois Steward* and commented on its high-quality photography. They would like to see more articles in the magazine:

"I think it's unique, and it's a higher-quality steward publication than any others in the area. It's the best. I'd like to think that you can maintain it, and I think you've done a great job producing the thing. It's worthy of some subsidy."

## Recommendations

### Editorial Content

Capitalize on the magazine's strength — Illinois: its natural history, places, wildlife, vegetation, and people in the context of stewardship. Continue covering many of the topics now covered in the magazine. Many respondents asked for more information on topics currently covered.

Add the location of areas in Illinois where subscribers can view habitat similar to the ones discussed in the magazine. Supply

sources of additional information in summary and basic overview articles.

Add articles on stewardship issues. The respondents have ideas about stewardship and they differ. Use the magazine as a forum for discussion.

### Marketing

The paid subscribers are more similar to *Audubon* subscribers than *Outdoor Life* subscribers in gender, age, college education, and professional occupation. They are more like the *Outdoor Life* subscribers and Illinois farmers than *Audubon* subscribers in where they live. Having the majority of the paid subscribers in rural areas or small towns may be more a function of early editorial content and initial promotional efforts than current editorial content and promotion.

While landowners are an important segment of *The Illinois Steward's* audience, the demographic similarity between *The Illinois Steward* and *Audubon* and frequent number of times environmental magazines were listed by respondents suggests that the editors need not limit their articles to how-to, land management articles.

Few respondents are hunters. However, outdoor recreation magazines are very popular among some readers. In deciding how much emphasis to place on wildlife harvest, consider these findings. According to survey results reported in *Sierra* (1994), 1.3 percent of the California population hold hunting licenses. Yet 29 percent of the state's population over 16 years of age observe, feed, or photograph wildlife. While the ratio of Illinois hunters to naturalists may vary as compared to California's, in California there are 20 naturalists for every hunter.

The respondents who are farmers want two topics covered: their story (agriculture) told and technical information related to farming. While any discussion of land use in Illinois must include agricultural use because so much land is devoted to production agriculture, most of the respondents did not ask for more how-to articles on farming. *The Illinois Steward* may need to write about agriculture but not technical how-to articles on production agriculture.

While the *Audubon* subscribers in Illinois would be more likely prospects than *Outdoor Life* subscribers or subscribers to a farm trade magazine, a direct mail promotion is only one component of a promotion plan. Other promotional activities should be reviewed for their cost effectiveness in obtaining new subscribers. Sufficient

efforts should be devoted to retaining current subscribers as they offer the best return per promotional dollar spent (Schein, 1993). A readership study helps editors know whether the content is meeting reader needs.

For direct mail efforts, select mailing lists from magazines with reader demographic profiles and interests similar to *The Illinois Steward* reader profile. Select the zip codes that have higher-than-average numbers of landowners with more than five acres. Then determine the response rate of each promotional effort and list used to know which ones are cost effective and which are not.

#### **Possibilities for the Future**

As the editorial content evolves, the editors need to keep in touch with their readers to be sure they are meeting their readers' information needs. The demographics will change as a result of changing editorial content (Sheiman, 1993) which means lists with different demographic profiles may yield higher response rates in direct mail promotions than the current ones in use.

One possible area for future study is why some subscribers drop their subscriptions. At the time of the study the renewal rate was between 50 and 60 percent. While subscribers do not renew for a variety of reasons (Sullivan, 1993), determining the reasons why some of *The Illinois Steward* subscribers do not renew may be helpful in shaping the future direction of the magazine.

#### **Conclusions**

The focus of a magazine often changes over time in response to reader input, publishers' ideas and/or responses to changes in the environment. Knowing the impact of the changes on subscriptions and readers' perceptions of the magazine helps editors to stay in touch with the readers and their needs, and to focus the magazine clearly on readers' needs.

Obtaining new subscribers in a cost effective way is often necessary to keep a magazine, especially one with no advertising, alive. Knowing who the readers are helps publishers locate other potential readers who are likely to subscribe to the magazine.

#### **Footnote**

1. The confidence interval for the N of 241 is plus or minus 5%. It is calculated at  $p=.05$  and a mean of 50%. The farther the mean is from 50% the more the confidence interval narrows.

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