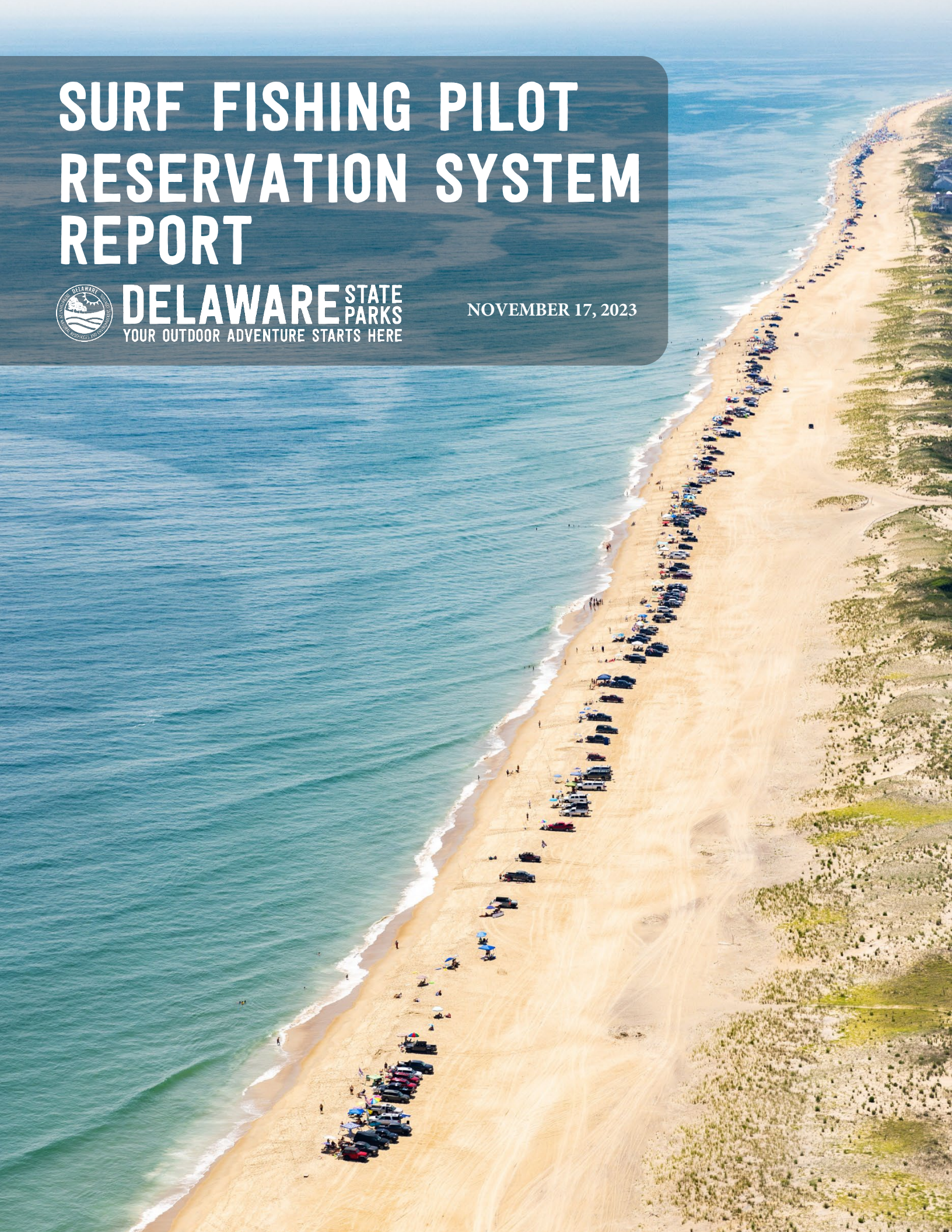


SURF FISHING PILOT RESERVATION SYSTEM REPORT



DELAWARE STATE
PARKS
YOUR OUTDOOR ADVENTURE STARTS HERE

NOVEMBER 17, 2023



BACKGROUND

Starting in 2019, the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control (DNREC) surf fishing permits were capped at 17,000 annually to address the unsustainable growth of the surf fishing program. The intent of the cap, along with other management tools such as single file parking, was to ensure surf fishing remained a safe and positive experience without overwhelming the natural resource. The cap reached a tipping point in 2022 when all permits sold-out in less than four hours, leaving many previous permit holders without the ability to access drive-on surf fishing at Delaware State Park's multi-use beaches for the entire year.

In spring of 2022, DNREC Division of Parks and Recreation initiated an extensive research process to identify best practices, gather input and develop recommendations for managing the program while expanding access to those who want to drive onto state park beaches to surf fish. Key steps in the process included sending more than 30,000 surveys to current and previous surf fishing permit holders. With more than 7,000 responses received, gathering of data about the existing surf fishing program and researching best practices used by organizations nationwide, were utilized to identify potential strategies. The division partnered with the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) to place traffic counters at surf fishing entrances. Additionally, the division gathered aerial footage and photographs for surf fishing vehicle counts with the help of a Delaware State Police Helicopter flyover during a peak summer weekend.

The division created a surf fishing permit workgroup to evaluate the data and provide feedback about potential solutions. The workgroup was comprised of members from the Delaware General Assembly, DelDOT, Delaware Volunteer Firefighters Association, Delaware Parks and Recreation Advisory Council, Delaware Mobile Surf Fishermen club, experts in environmental science from Delaware universities, and business and community members. The workgroup recommendations were presented and endorsed by the Parks and Recreation Council in August 2022.

The approved recommended changes implemented included the removal of the 17,000 sales cap to allow more individuals an opportunity to purchase a surf fishing permit. In addition, DNREC instituted a Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program requiring daily advanced reservations on peak weekends and holidays to manage the number of vehicles that drive onto state park multi-use beaches while protecting the natural resource. In addition, all surf fishing permit holders are now required to view an instructional surf fishing/beach driving video prior to driving onto Delaware State Park beaches.

DAILY ADVANCED RESERVATION IMPLEMENTATION

Surf Fishing Permit Communications Campaign Announcement

The following outlines digital activity and engagement metrics observed during the launch and year one activation of the Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program communications campaign occurring from November 2022 to September 2023. The campaign was developed to effectively inform and engage users about the new Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program at Delaware State Parks. The digital aspect of the campaign was a significant success, as shown with the following metrics:

- Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program Change Page (Surf Fishing Permit Update - Delaware State Parks website (destateparks.com):
 - Page views: 129,757

- Average time on page: 2 minutes and 48 seconds
- Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program Resource Downloads (FAQ, Maps, Instructions): 12,000

Visitation to the Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program Change page exceeded expectations, with page views being 74% higher and visitors staying on the page 26% longer than on the regular Surf Fishing Permit Page. It is important to acknowledge that during this reporting period, Google Analytics underwent significant updates to its tracking tools, which may have affected data reporting. As such, the provided metrics are approximate but still provide valuable insights into the campaign's performance. The campaign effectively utilized social media platforms to reach a wide audience, with the following results across the division's social media channels which include Facebook, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter):

- Social media reach: 534,521 accounts
- Social media link clicks: 12,356 link clicks

The campaign extended its reach through signage, including signs placed in parks and surf fishing access points, flyers in the parks and local businesses that featured QR codes for easy access to digital resources. A total of 480 engagements were recorded through QR code scans. The Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program communications campaign for the period of November 2022 to September 2023 demonstrated strong digital engagement, significant social media reach and effective signage.

Reservation Details and Requirements for 2023 Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program

During summer weekends and holidays, daily reservations were required at all Delaware drive-on multi-use state park beaches:

- Beach Plum Island
- Cape Henlopen – Gordons Pond and Herring Point
- Cape Henlopen – Navy Crossing
- Cape Henlopen – Point Crossing
- Delaware Seashore – 3Rs
- Delaware Seashore – Key Box/Conquest/Faithful Steward
- Fenwick Island – York/Middle/South

The reservation reserved a specific beach location, but not a specific parking spot on that beach. Each location had a limited number of reservations available per day. The number of reservable parking spots was limited and subject to change based on beach conditions, weather, and volume. The following summarizes the Surf Fishing Permit Pilot Program process:

- Reservations were first-come, first-served and opened the week prior to the coming weekend.
 - Tuesday went live for Saturday.
 - Wednesday went live for Sunday.

- Thursday went live for upcoming weekday holidays.
- Reservations were limited to one reservation per customer per day.
- Reservations were not available for Off Peak Permit holders.
- Reservation fee was \$4 per day that reserved access from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.
 - One-year and two-year permit holders were able to access the beach without a reservation on weekends and holidays after 4 p.m. but were required to be off the beach by 8 a.m. the next morning.
- The division developed a queuing system with the contracted reservation vendor that would address volume demands on the website.
 - In addition, the weekly reservation windows were supported by virtual calls that included the division, the contracted reservation vendor and Department of Technology and Information staff that monitored sales volume, system performance, etc.
- Reservations could be canceled with no refund at any time.
- Reservations could not be changed once booked.
 - If modifications were needed for a reservation, it was canceled and rebooked as availability allowed. All fees applied.

The goal of the reservation system was to provide more anglers access to drive-on surf fishing beaches, especially those who didn't have access due to the 17,000 cap being reached in 2022. In 2022 there were 23,623 permits (including one-year and two-year) in circulation and 24,259 (including one-year and two-year) permits in 2023. This represented a 3% increase in the number of anglers having access to drive-on surf fishing beaches. The number of off-peak permits decreased from 6,005 in 2022 to 1,798 in 2023.

The reservation system provides anglers the ability to reserve by location and for a specific date, but it also provides improved communication and planning. Reservations effectively eliminated frustration from anglers who were turned away at the drive-on locations when Delaware State Park's day-use lots reached capacity (i.e., Cape Henlopen State Park). Anglers with a valid daily reservation are permitted access when parks are at capacity, and they can arrive at any time during the reservation period. Cape Henlopen State Park had 15 park closures in 2023 due to reaching capacity and anglers with a daily reservation were permitted access. The reservation system also made anglers aware of availability and provided the opportunity to make reservations at alternate drive-on locations which they may not have used in the past when their preferred drive-on surf location was sold-out.

Cape Henlopen State Park Closures	
2022	2023
19	15

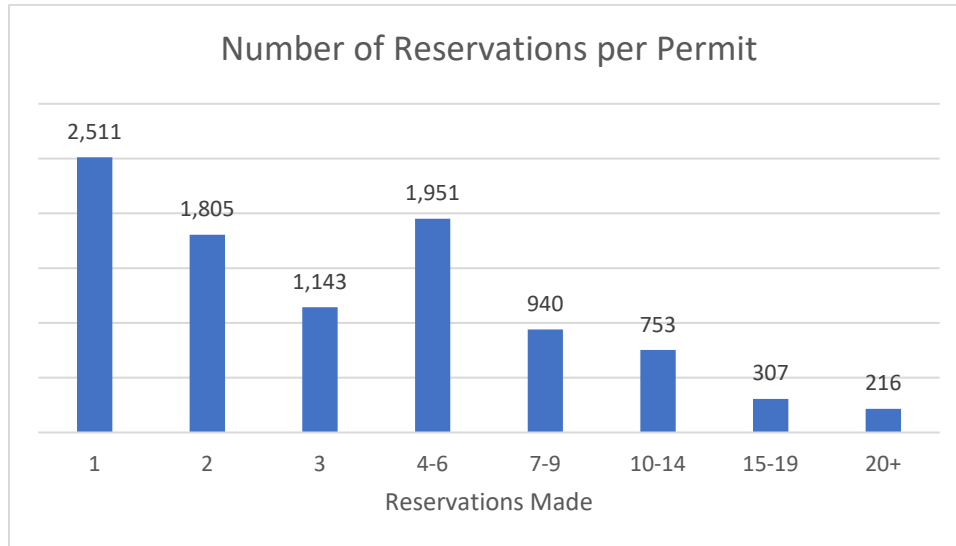
RESERVATION STATISTICS

The drive-on surf fishing beach reservation system went live on Tuesday, May 16, 2023, and functioned flawlessly. Customers reported the system was easy to use, they were able to process transactions quickly and the newly developed high volume queuing system did not have to be engaged. There were a total of 36 reservable dates and 65,944 available reservations for the

season. Out of the 65,944 available reservations, 46,258 (70%) were sold. A total of 644 reservations were canceled by customers allowing these reservation spots to open for other anglers.

Of the 36 reservable dates, there were no days that were completely sold-out. Anglers could access a surf fishing beach somewhere within Delaware State Parks if desired. July 4th weekend had the most reservations purchased for all locations.

Of the 24,248 one-year and two-year active surf fishing permits that could be utilized in the 2023 season, 9,626 (40%) surf permit holders placed a daily reservation. The following graph shows the number of reservations placed per permit for the season.



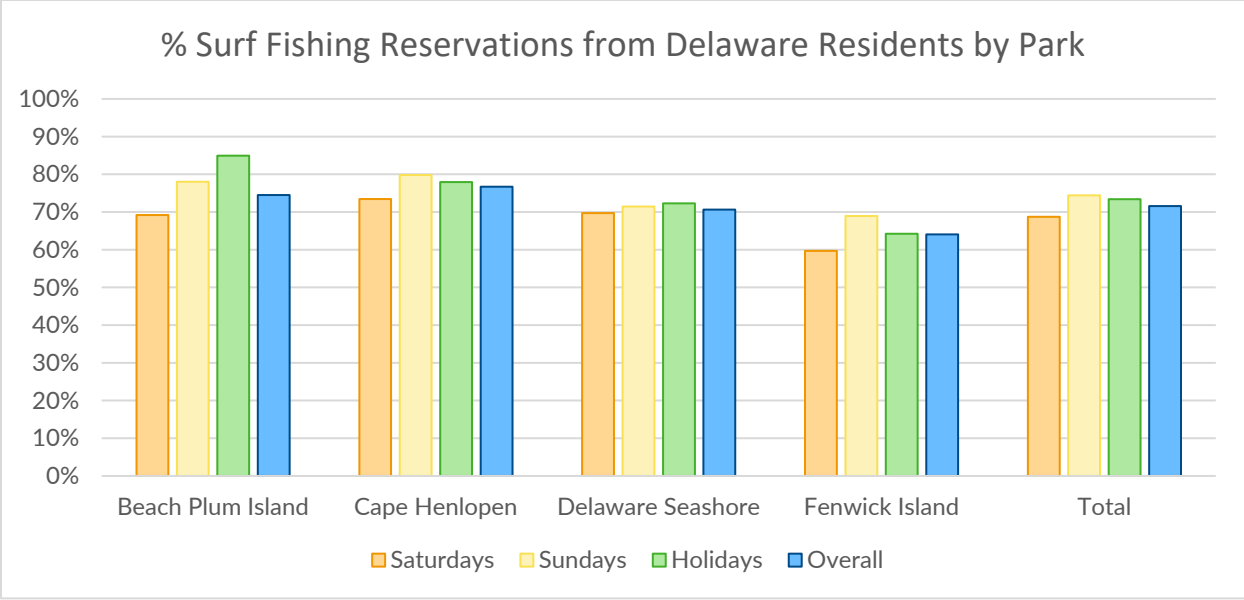
One of the components of the pilot was the establishment of a dedicated call center for anglers that did not have home internet and/or mobile service to make reservations. The call center was managed by the division's existing central reservation contractor. The call center received 786 calls over the course of the season; 540 calls (69%) resulted in reservations made. This represents 1% of all daily surf fishing reservations made.

RESERVATIONS BY DELAWARE RESIDENTS

Beach Plum Island (74%) and Cape Henlopen State Park (77%) both saw a higher share of Delaware residents making reservations, as compared to Delaware Seashore State Park (71%) and Fenwick Island State Park (64%).

Overall, 72% of all reservations were made by Delaware residents.

Additionally, there was a higher share of Delaware residents booking on Sundays (74%) or holidays (73%), as compared to Saturdays (69%).



RESERVATIONS BY ORDER TIME

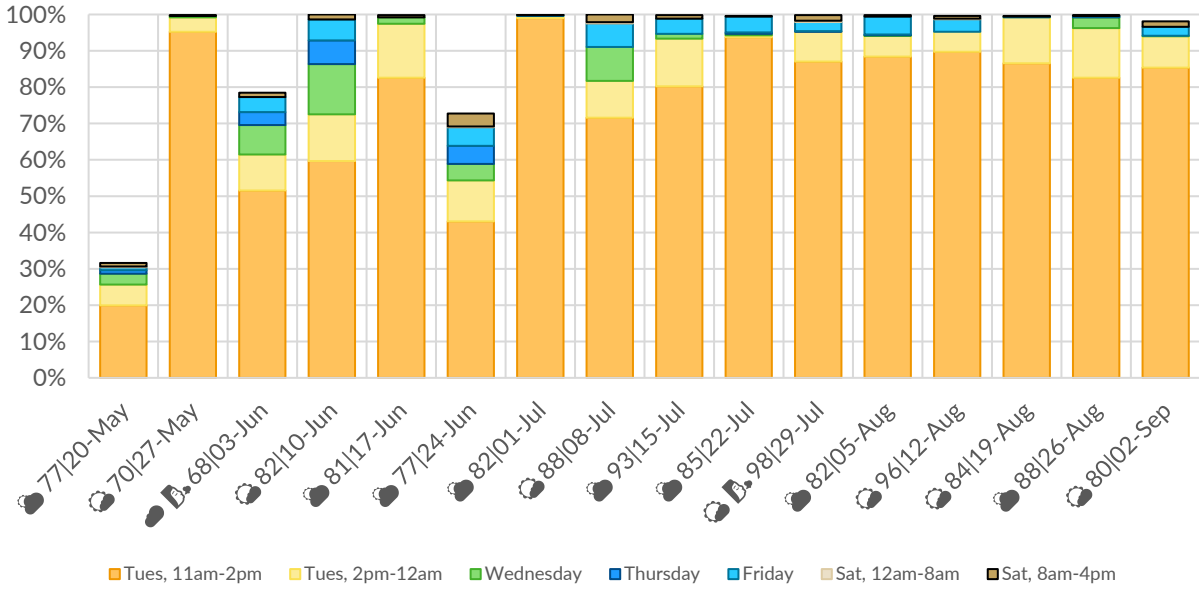
In 2023, most reservations were made within the first three hours of the reservation window opening. This was most prevalent on holiday weekends. However, some surf beach access crossings did not see the same rush or demand as those at Cape Henlopen State Park and Delaware Seashore State Park’s 3Rs Crossing.

Cape Henlopen State Park was the most reserved location, almost always at capacity, with a very large percentage of reservations placed in the first three hours of booking, especially on holiday weekends.

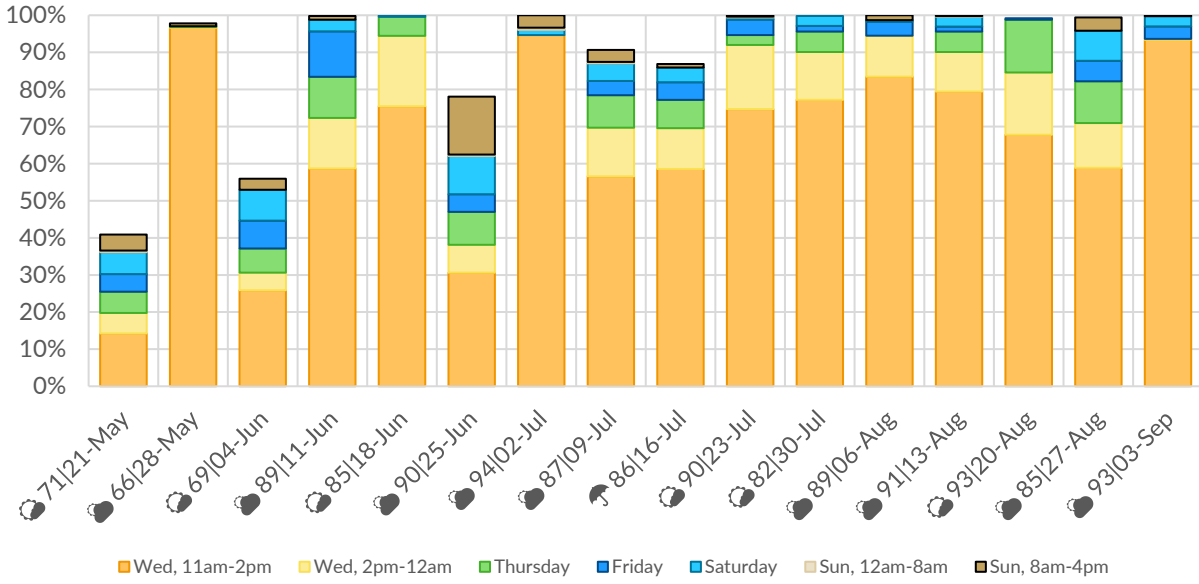
At Delaware Seashore State Park, 3Rs saw high reservation demand similar to Cape Henlopen State Park, reaching capacity very early, especially on holiday weekends. However, unlike Cape Henlopen State Park, 3Rs occupancy was typically much lower on Sundays, while Cape Henlopen State Park continued to see very high occupancy.

The beaches at Delaware Seashore State Park north of the Indian River Inlet (Key Box Road Crossing, Faithful Steward Crossing, and Conquest Crossing) and Fenwick Island State Park saw less demand than Cape Henlopen State Park and 3Rs beach. They had higher demand on holiday weekends and lower occupancy otherwise. Reservations for these locations were placed closer to the weekend and the day of arrival.

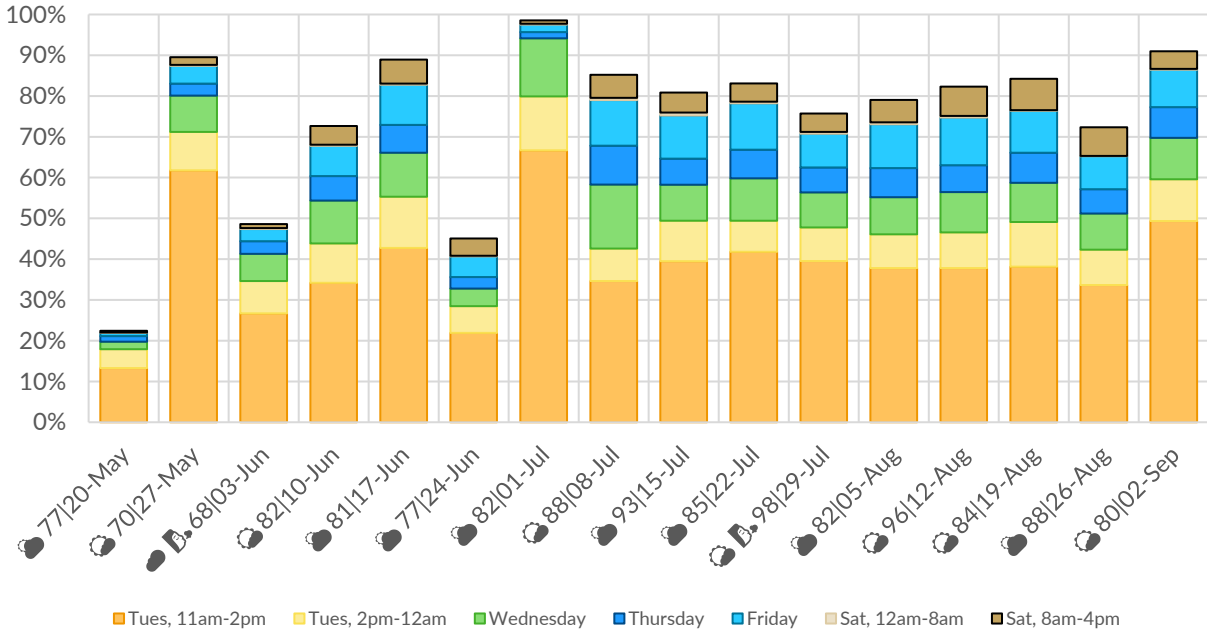
Cape Henlopen Reservations Purchase Time for Saturdays



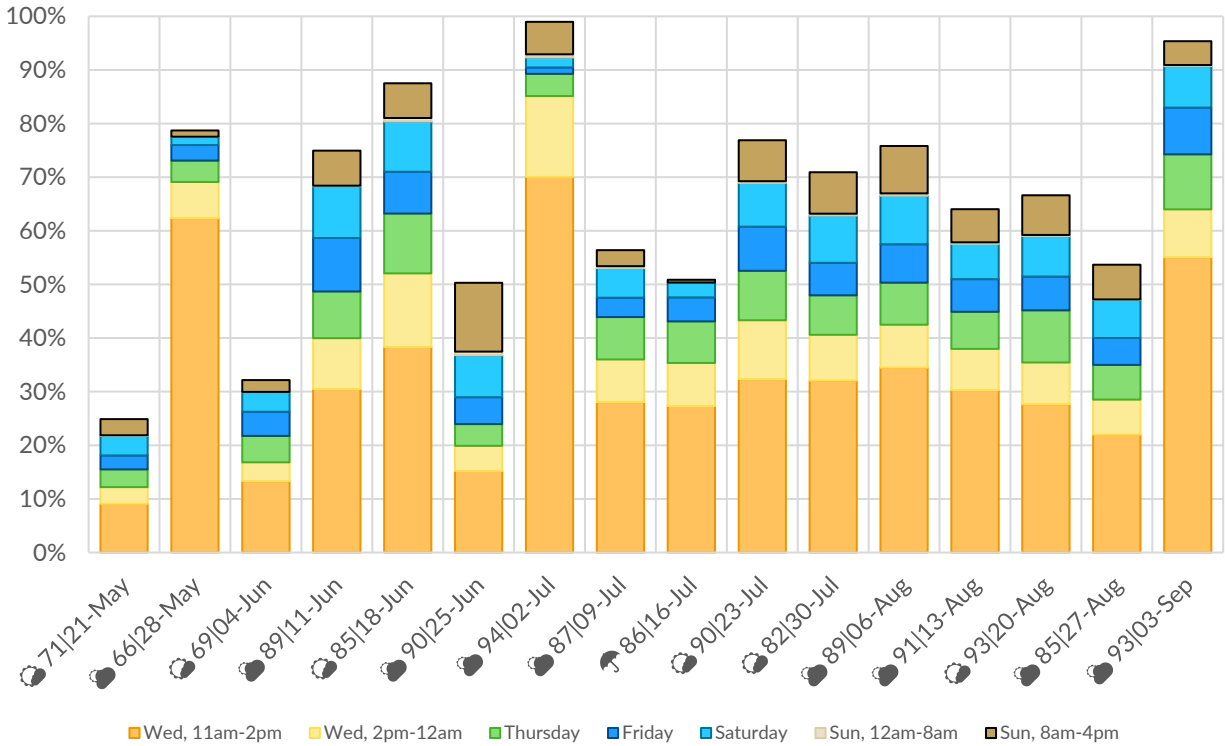
Cape Henlopen Reservations Purchase Time for Sundays



Total Reservations for All Locations Purchase Time for Saturdays



Total Reservations for All Locations Purchase Time for Sundays



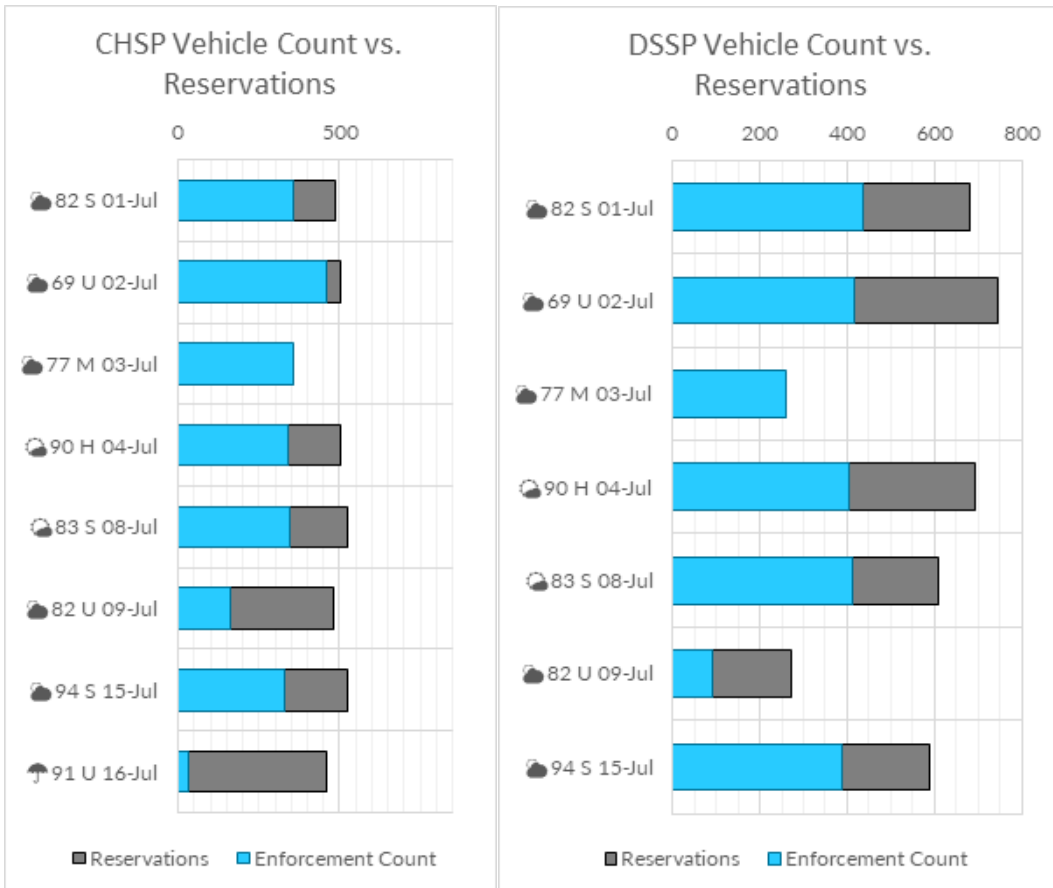
SURF FISHING PROGRAM ENFORCEMENT

Vehicle counts were conducted weekly by DNREC's Natural Resource Police at Cape Henlopen and Delaware Seashore State Parks. These counts were typically performed from 12:00 pm to 2:00 pm. Counts were performed on Saturday, Sunday and Wednesday each week. Additionally, holidays were counted, as well as Monday, July 3, due to Independence Day falling on a Tuesday.

The graphs below show compliance with obtaining a reservation was very high with Natural Resource Police count reporting less vehicles on the beach than the number of reservations for that day and/or location. It is important to note that the reservation time is from 8:00am to 4:00pm, allowing anglers to come and go at any time during this period, which impacts validation of exact reservations and vehicles at any given time.

In addition to the daily engagement and routine checks conducted by Park Patrol Officers and DNREC's Natural Resource Police, there were eight Surf Fishing Vehicle checkpoints at surf fishing drive-on beach access points. Checkpoints ensured proper fishing and safety equipment and valid permit compliance. The checks required the scheduling of 19 Natural Resource Police Officers, 42 Park Patrol Officers and 26 Park Watch volunteers. The surf fishing vehicle checks resulted in 559 vehicles being checked and 39 vehicles being denied access to the surf fishing beaches for not having proper fishing equipment (7), safety equipment (14) and not having a permit and/or valid reservation (18). There were also two surf fishing surges conducted (Cape Henlopen State Park - Point and Navy Crossing, Delaware Seashore State Park - 3 R's) where DNREC's Natural Resource Police and civilian state park staff walked drive-on surf fishing beaches and checked each vehicle for equipment and permit compliance. There were a total of 235 vehicles checked resulting in 28 warnings and 4 summons and/or tickets being issued.

There were 302 summons/arrests/tickets and 245 written warnings issued for surf fishing enforcement contacts outside checkpoints and surges as of October 10, 2023, at Cape Henlopen, Delaware Seashore and Fenwick Island State Parks. **The 302 tickets issued YTD in 2023 represent a 303% increase in the number of issued since 2016.**



CHANGES MADE DURING 2023 IN RESPONSE TO CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

- The reservation system vendor removed the expiration date field that was causing customers delays using the online reservation process. The removal of this field simplified the online purchase process.
- After Memorial Day, on rainy or inclement weather days, the division increased the number of daily reservations to accommodate “no shows”.
- Beginning in July, the division increased the number of reservations weekly between 10-20% depending on the locations based on DNREC’s Natural Resource Police weekly counts of actual vehicles on the beach from the previous week. Beach Plum and Gordons Pond/Herring Point were the only locations where capacity was not increased.
- As part of the division’s mission statement, we are responsible for the stewardship of the lands and the cultural and natural resources that we have been entrusted to protect and manage. There was a discovery of a piping plover nest at Gordon’s Pond in May that resulted in the temporary closure of 800 feet reducing the number of reservable spots on

the beach for protection of the new nest and any piping plover chicks that may hatch and fledge from it.

- Another stretch of beach at Cape Henlopen State Park, The Point, was closed March 1 through September 1 to protect threatened and endangered beach-nesting and migratory shorebird species to include red knots, piping plovers, American oystercatchers and least terns. When this stretch opened it created an additional 275 spaces.

CANCELLATIONS

The daily reservation system allowed for cancellations through the reservation date which provided anglers an opportunity to obtain a drive-on reservation even if the reservation location was sold-out. Cancelled reservations were typically re-booked by other visitors, especially on sold-out dates and locations.

CUSTOMER FEEDBACK SURVEYS

To gauge customer feedback, the reservation system vendor sent weekly surveys to all customers who purchased surf fishing reservations in 2023. The average survey rating trended higher throughout the season, with an average rating for the season of nearly 3.0.

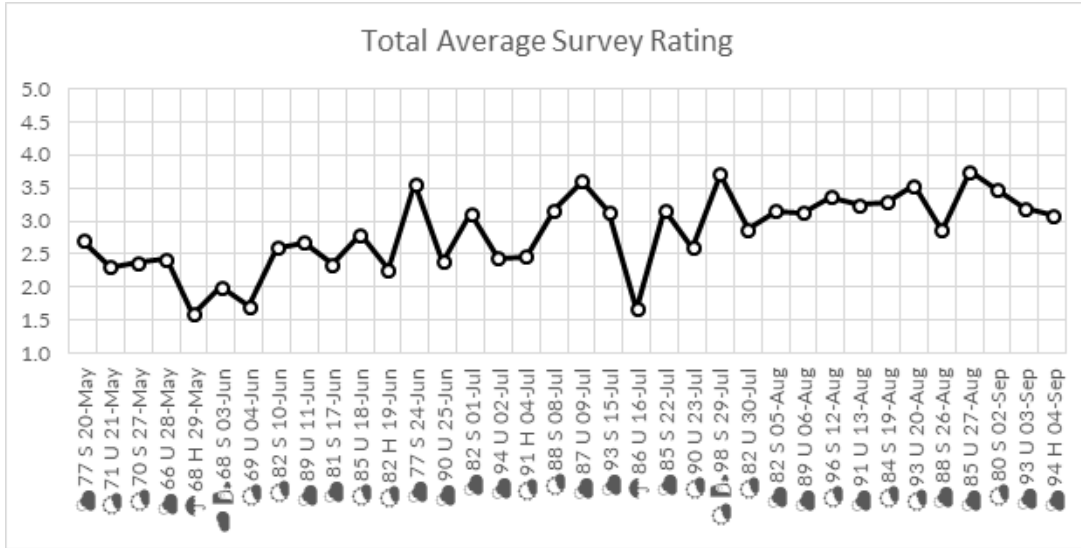
The division received 837 survey ratings and customers had the ability to provide additional comments. Below are some comments that were received.

"The site works well. The couple times a reservation I requested was unavailable, I've called and the operators were pleasant, professional and were able to confirm that the site I was requesting was indeed sold-out and offered options and suggestions on other sites and to check back in case a reservation was cancelled."

"When we showed up on Saturday afternoon, Aug. 5 to enter Cape Henlopen to access Herring Point for our reservation, traffic was backed up and the sign said the park was closed because it was at capacity. While several cars ahead of us turned around, many continued thinking they would gain access to the park. They were eventually turned away when they reached the check point at the entrance to the park. We were allowed to continue through. We waited about 30 minutes in the traffic; it would have saved us some time if Rangers were positioned prior to entering the park to turn vehicles away that didn't have a reservation."

"We entered the beach just before 1:45pm and it was still rather full at that time. We noticed several people on the beach who were spread out over a large area (more than 2 car lengths) so they were taking up what could have been spots for others like us. Other than those issues, we had a great experience."

"We don't like having to pay for a reservation and not getting a refund if the weather is bad. Not cool. We fish in most weather but refuse to stand with the west wind flies. Refunds should be given for valid requests."



Comment	Average Rating
System or process was easy	4.81
General positive comment	4.92
Improves beach experience	4.77
Video was good or useful	5.00
No comment provided	4.67
Issue with fee	1.74
Want more enforcement or someone checking reservations	2.30
Issue with cancellation policy	1.95
General dissatisfaction with the program with no specific issue	1.20
Issue with weather	1.63
System needs to save information	2.87

FEEDBACK RECEIVED FROM THE MEMBERS OF THE SURF FISHING PERMIT WORKGROUP AT THE END OF THE SEASON:

- Warren Jones, DE Volunteer Firefighters Association - *"The only negative comment I heard was people making reservations and not showing up, leaving empty spaces on the beach. Other than that I think it worked well."*
- Ron Ladue, Chamber member - *"I utilized the program often this summer and thought on the whole it worked quite well. It took some effort to be available to log on at precisely the time access became available but overall, I felt the program worked. If I had any criticism at all it is that it was obvious a few times that not everyone who reserved a spot actually made it to the beach - evident by the lack of vehicles on a few occasions. I believe it is a good program to continue."*
- Mike Mathisen, Seaside Villas Condo Association - *"As to the summer, I believe it went well. Generally, the beach was pretty full with both bathers as well as mobile surf*

fishermen. The fishermen generally stayed away from the bathers and were lined up in unoccupied areas of the beach. I did not see, nor did I hear of any confrontations between the two groups. I will say, that the beach was wall to wall on certain days, and that the allocation of reservations in our area was about right, i.e., both groups had the room to do what they wanted to do. I would not increase the allocation in Fenwick since, as I said, on a number of weekends, the beach was fully utilized. Also, it seemed that there were less trucks speeding this year as they drove down the beach. Hopefully this was the result of the informational video that they were supposed to watch."

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CONTINUATION OF SURF FISHING PERMIT PILOT PROGRAM IN 2024

- Start reservations on Memorial Day weekend in 2024, no soft opening necessary.
- Move from one reservation per customer to one reservation per permit number.
- Researching with reservation system vendor the ability to retain customers' vehicle information in future years.