

One hundred ten thousand people can't be wrong.

That's how many more Wisconsinites are ice fishing these days than a decade ago, according to results from a recently released national recreation survey.

"Clearly more people are getting interested in ice fishing in Wisconsin, which is great," says Mike Staggs, Wisconsin's fisheries director.

"It's a low cost way to try fishing or to extend your season if you're a veteran open water angler. It's as easy as drilling a hole -- or finding a hole someone else left behind -- and using some basic equipment to catch some fish for dinner."

An estimated 590,700 Wisconsinites 16 and over report they ice fish, up from 479,900 in 2000, according to the most recent National Survey on Recreation and the Environment.

Terry Margenau, a DNR fish supervisor in Spooner and an avid ice angler, credits the sport's growing popularity to several factors, perhaps primarily to the development of specialized ice fishing gear.

"I'm not talking just about the basics, but more on the creature comforts side and, of course, technology," he says. "I have never been one to freeze my buns off for a fish, so have always traveled with a shelter and a heater.

"But now shelters have evolved drastically to be light and made of high quality fabric, heaters are better and safer, and take your pick on sleds to transport your gear. Not to mention the apparel now available to keep you warm. Anglers are equipped to catch fish and be comfortable while doing it."

Margenau also thinks more people are ice fishing because it provides angling opportunities that don't require a boat. And more second-home owners from the Twin Cities, Milwaukee and Madison metro areas seem to be spending more of their winters in the Northwoods as the internet makes it easier to set up a home office anywhere.

"Tag returns from fish tagging we have done supports the contention that historically the winter is dominated by residents," he says.

Skip Sommerfeldt caught this 25-inch walleye early in the 2010-2011 ice fishing season. He had the most flags and caught the most fish in 27 years. See Ice Fishing Wisconsin for the rest of his fishing diary.

Skip Sommerfeldt, a DNR fish biologist based in Park Falls and an avid angler, adds a few other reasons for the growing popularity, including increased media coverage and the popularity of recreational television shows, the milder winter temperatures and lower snow totals than in past years, which make it more comfortable to be outside, and an increase in the amount of leisure time, whether through the growing ranks of retired Wisconsin citizens and a higher unemployment rate that makes more 'fishing time' available to some.

"And to toot our own horn -- the success of Wisconsin's fisheries management program," Sommerfeldt says. "Season limitations, size regulation and various management activities have ensured that there is an abundance of sport fishing opportunities all throughout Wisconsin." And lastly, says Sommerfeldt, who ice fished 93 of 96 possible days last year and recorded both a record number of flags and fish caught, "it's just plain fun! There's nothing like watching the slow steady turn on the spindle of your tip-up and knowing that there's a big fish on the end of the line ...and then seeing that fish fill the hole as you slide it out onto the ice."