

11-1-2008

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Recommended Citation

Smith, J. B. (2008) "The Economic "Ripple Effect" on the Field of Aquatics: Not a Pretty Picture," *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*: Vol. 2: No. 4, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.02.04.01>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/ijare/vol2/iss4/1>

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EDITORIAL

International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education, 2008, 2, 281-283
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The Economic "Ripple Effect" on the Field of Aquatics: Not a Pretty Picture

I don't know about you, but I feel I'm pretty good at looking at the "big picture" of many things in life. I often look for what I call the "ripple effect" that may occur following various events. For example, what if Bobby Kennedy had lived to run for and become president in 1968? We undoubtedly would never have had a Watergate break-in or a Nixon resignation. What if Bill Buckner hadn't made that error in the World Series and the Red Sox had broken "the curse" in 1986, instead of just recently? Consider recent election results. How would our world be different if Florida had gone to Gore in 2000 or Ohio to Kerry in 2004?

Right now, I don't know anyone who is all that happy about paying almost \$4 for a gallon of gas. I vividly remember a scant twelve months ago when it was inching up and went over the \$3 per gallon mark, and now, a year later, the cost is up another 33%. Worse, every three months over the past couple of years, Exxon/Mobil (along with many other big oil companies) has reported record profits, consistently in the \$11 billion range, which is nearly \$1 billion per week.

I'm an aquatic director, not an economist or chemical engineer, but, having seen the long gas lines in 1974 and 1979, I realize enough to know that our dependence on foreign oil along with the obscene profits of oil companies hurt us consumers each and every day. Control over oil prices is out of our country's hands due both to where we get a majority of our petroleum supplies and to reliance on petroleum in our society. Because of this lack of control, it continually sends widespread "ripples" through every aspect of our lives, and not just when we fill up the tank on our auto.

A prime example of this "system shock" today is that airlines have to find a way to make up their cost of soaring fuel prices. Do you remember when we actually could anticipate a free meal on most flights, even in coach class seats? The most recent "ripple effect" is that many airlines now are requiring the customer to pay for food as well as luggage on a per bag basis. Be prepared to tell your children in 2020—or maybe sooner—that, yes, there was a time when checking airline luggage was free, and we did not pay for them on a per bag basis!

My eyes were opened really wide while I was getting my car inspected a few weeks ago. Joe, the man who drives our children's school bus, operates a small auto service business. His wife, Jeanne, works as a server at a local restaurant, called "Fire Mountain." Fire Mountain is my kind of place to go eat because it's an "all you can eat" buffet and it's not too pricey. Until recently, the tables always were filled and there was a line out the door with a thirty-minute wait to get a table. When getting my car inspected a few weeks ago, Jeanne passed through Joe's shop and I happened to ask her in the course of the conversation, "Do you see a decline in the number of patrons at Fire Mountain?" Her reply was "I wish it were a mere *decline*, but it's more like a *nosedive*." I was stunned at what she then described to

me. There are no long lines and plenty of empty tables, staff members who resign are not being replaced, and other employees are being asked to reduce the number of hours they work. With fewer patrons coming in to eat, those working for tips have received an unanticipated pay cut. In a word, Jeanne summarized it as devastating. She left me with this, "If people have to choose between eating out and filling their tanks with gas, the gas gauge always wins."

Now let's turn our attention to the "ripple effect" in our field of aquatics. Start by considering swimming lessons, a fundamental component of all our aquatic programming: teaching people to swim, teaching them to swim better, and keeping them both safe and alive. There is a potential ripple effect related to high petroleum prices for us here as well. What if parents enroll their children less often, or worse, not at all, because of the ripple effect of rising prices of everything we purchase? Doesn't that make children and other non-swimmers less safe, which may lead to a potential rise in accidents and drownings? Won't fewer swimmers in a swim lesson program hurt the program's aquatic budget, especially as the cost of overhead and other program costs continue to rise? If Jeanne thinks people eat out less so they can fill their gas tanks, won't they also be less likely to enroll in swim lessons as well?

How about other recreational aquatic programs? Are people already starting to drop their memberships in local YMCAs, recreation departments, and summer swimming facilities due to the economic ripple effect? How about membership on summer and year round age group swimming teams? Is there potential for swimmers to drop out of swimming because parents can't or don't want to afford for their children to compete as they have in the past because of higher program costs (e.g., memberships, coaching fees, travel costs to meets)? Are increased costs already rippling over to your swim team membership and team fees, pricing some people out of your program?

Consider aquatic programs for the elderly and those with special needs. These groups prefer and even require pool temperatures elevated above 85° F (30° C), which increases energy costs dramatically. Will these programs be in danger because the facility is so strapped for cash that the programs must be eliminated or they are cancelled because of falling attendance if the water is not kept as warm? There have to be more than a few administrators who are asking, "Should we afford to heat the pool, because it costs more in both energy and chemicals?"

Let's look at the real "luxury items" of the aquatic profession such as boating and SCUBA diving. If people already are choosing between Fire Mountain and their gas tanks, there has to be a ripple effect on the boating and SCUBA fields. The cost of boats and fueling up the boat engines (which can run over \$1000 for an inboard with a large tank and engine), the purchase of SCUBA gear, going on SCUBA trips, and enrolling in the required continuing education to maintain SCUBA skills are just a few ways the economy may ripple outward and cause serious impacts on our aquatic field.

I've seen this ripple effect occurring over the past ten years with SCUBA students of mine who take a SCUBA class but don't complete their open water dives because of the cost. This likely is a ripple effect of rising tuition and decreased state funding for higher education. I feel that these aquatic programs could continue to take a hit in the weeks, months, and years ahead because of the increasing financial constraints.

Unfortunately, I am not able to suggest easy answers to these challenging issues; rather, I'm just stating that "Hey, there really is a ripple effect from the economy on the field of aquatics" and it is not a very pretty picture right now! In fact, it appears that the overall picture may become even uglier and uglier before it brightens.

I do think that how we aquatic professionals prepare proactively may make the difference between the health and even survival of many of our aquatic programs. Should we try to decrease our fees for swimming instruction programs to maintain enrollment? Or perhaps we should consider economic-based scholarships for swim instructions, swim teams, and programs for differently-abled persons? There must be other creative solutions for proactively dealing with the economic impact on our aquatic programs. I would be interested in readers' personal experiences with the economic ripple effect on your aquatic programs as well as ideas about how to improve the economic picture for our aquatic programs until the economy improves.

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Editor's Note: This editorial is one of a series being presented by members of the *IJARE* Editorial Board. Your reactions, pro and con, via letters to the editor are most welcome.