
Main Street America's View of the Environment

The *1998 NEETF/Roper Survey* reveals there is persistent misinformation concerning the environment in America. These “myths” can stand in the way of our addressing more immediate and wide-ranging issues. What follows is a summary of some of these misperceptions through the eyes of the average American.

Pollution-Free Energy – A majority of the public thinks (incorrectly) that energy is produced in non air-polluting ways in America, mostly by hydroelectric power. Only one in three see coal burning as an issue.

Widespread Industrial Water Pollution – Nearly half think the leading cause of water pollution is factories. Pollution running off the land (our leading problem) is not identified by four of five Americans.

Dangerous Spray Cans – Americans think ozone-depleting CFCs come mostly from aerosol cans despite a 1978 ban. Only one in three see air conditioners and refrigerators as the issue.

Safe Underground Nuclear Storage – Many Americans think spent fuel from nuclear plants goes to a deep underground safe haven out West. Just one in six know that a permanent storage has yet to be found.

Diaper-Clogged Landfills – Much of the public sees disposable diapers as the main source of waste in landfills. Just one in four see the vast amount of paper we pour into crowded landfills as the issue.

Recycling Paper for Tree Saving – Americans overwhelmingly think that recycling paper saves trees, but this is a misconception since most trees used in paper production are planted for that purpose. Just one in four Americans understands that a significant benefit of recycling is reducing waste going into landfills.

Worldwide Famine – Americans incorrectly believe famine, not pollution, is the leading cause of childhood death worldwide. Only one in eleven know microorganisms in the water are the cause

Rampant Oil Spills – Only one in six Americans knows that changing one's car oil is the main source of petroleum pollution in rivers, lakes and bays—most think it is oil rigs, tankers and refineries.

Animals Ensnared in Beverage Six-pack Rings – Millions of Americans snip six-pack rings, seen by a majority as the leading entanglement problem. Unfortunately millions more cut and leave their fishing lines out in the wild (the leading cause of entanglement).

Routinely Tested Bottled Water – A majority think it is regularly tested by the government. It is not.

Tested-Safe Household Chemicals – A majority assume that some government agency must also be screening household chemicals for health and environmental safety. None does.

Tap Water Tested Routinely for Animal Waste and Pesticides – A majority of Americans think the water utilities routinely test for these pollutants, when only a few test for these pollutants.

Introduction

The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation (NEETF) commissioned a Roper Starch Worldwide survey to help America’s leaders—educators, policy makers, business executives, media representatives and the general public—better understand what Americans know about the environment. The survey includes an assessment of their attitudes and behaviors around environmental issues as well. Using a quiz style format, *The 1998 National Report Card* (also referred to as the *NEETF/Roper Survey*) examines the public’s belief in environmental “myths”—outdated or erroneous information about the environment. This misinformation must be corrected if the public is to understand why laws are passed to protect the environment and how they, themselves, can become a part of the solution.

The *1998 NEETF/Roper Survey* is a continuation of seven straight years of data gathering about Americans’ views on the environment. *The National Report Card* was launched in 1992 by Times Mirror Magazines in collaboration with Roper Starch. Times Mirror commissioned each of the first four years of the survey, and NEETF took over the project in 1995.

The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation is a private nonprofit organization authorized by Congress in 1990. The Foundation strives to help America meet critical national challenges by connecting environmental learning to progress on issues of national concern such as health care, educational excellence, our competitive position in business and effective community participation in managing our natural resources. In addition to making leveraged challenge grants for outstanding environmental projects across the nation, NEETF seeks funds to support several innovative environmental education programs, which include, along with *The National Report Card*:

- **Wellness & The Environment**—integrating environmental health into our public health and health care systems.
- **Safe Drinking Water Program**—providing an educational backdrop to government Consumer Confidence Reports on drinking water.
- **Institute for Corporate Environmental Mentoring**—fostering business-to-business mentoring to help companies improve environmental and economic performance.
- **Environmental Education and Academic Excellence**—promoting effective, science-based and objective environmental education as beneficial to students’ academic performance.
- **National Public Lands Day**—a nationwide, volunteer driven program improving and enhancing national parks, forests, lakes, wildlife habitats and other public land sites.

Overview and Highlights

As with its six predecessors, the *1998 NEETF/Roper Survey* investigates environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviors among adult Americans. While the environment is not always a daily front-page issue, in the late 1990s, the subject is as full of public importance and controversial positions and statements as ever. Water and air pollution, toxic waste, Superfund sites, the use of public lands for commercial purposes and the protection of endangered species are all issues facing the nation today. Attitudes about the issues vary by region, and even by household.

What are the sources of these differing attitudes? Are the positions people hold based on fact or fiction? To determine the extent to which Americans support inaccurate positions, this year's study includes a section centered around some common misperceptions or "environmental myths"—popular but incorrect information about environmental issues and problems. Once such myths are identified, educational programs can be created to address the differences between fact and fiction, fostering a population that better understands why laws are passed to protect the environment and how their own actions have an impact on the environment.

For the most part, general attitudes toward the environment and toward laws and regulations designed to protect the environment have remained stable over the last few years. While government intervention is questioned in many arenas of public life, Americans continue to largely support government programs when the environment is the area in question. And, many feel that the next few years will be critical for the long-term health of the planet.

The 1998 National Report Card: Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors evaluates public attitudes as they exist today and have changed over the past seven years. It is based on a nationally representative sample of 2,000 Americans, age 18 and older, surveyed by Roper Starch Worldwide in May 1998.

Environmental Knowledge and Environmental Myths

Although many Americans report that they possess some environmental knowledge, when asked to distinguish between environmental myths and environmental truths, the public encounters considerable difficulty. Not only do prevailing myths exist, but misconceptions are widespread on a number of issues. Thus, examining the responses of those who give the myth response is as enlightening for planning environmental education programs and policy initiatives as is calculating the percentages of those who identify the correct answers.

- For the fourth year in a row, about two-thirds of the American public rate themselves as having either "a lot" (10%) or "a fair amount" (58%) of knowledge about environmental issues and problems. As in past years, men are more likely than women to report they have at least a fair amount of environmental knowledge.

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- However, the environmental myths section in this report leads us to question these expressions of environmental knowledge. Presented with ten questions that each contained a myth answer, two plausible but incorrect answers and a correct answer, the myth response receives a plurality in seven cases. In fact, for three of the ten questions, a *majority* of Americans gave the incorrect myth answer.
 - The pervasiveness of environmental myths is surprising, as there are few consistent trends among demographic subgroups. Even those who say they know “a lot” about the environment support the myth response for several issues. The fact that there are few differences among subgroups—education, income—highlights the universal and persistent nature of the incorrect beliefs and the need for further environmental education for all Americans.
 - Looked at from the perspective of *correctly* identifying environmental truths, Americans average just 2.2 correct answers out of 10 (random guesses would have produced 2.5 correct responses). In addition, two important subgroup differences emerge. First, men are more likely than women to correctly answer seven of the 10 questions (though men average just 2.7 correct answers). Second, Americans with a college degree are consistently more likely than those with a high school education or less to give the correct answer (though even those with a college degree average just 3.1 correct answers).

Specific responses to myth questions are:

- ***How Most Electricity in the United States is Generated***—Just 27% of Americans know that most of our electricity (70% of total production) is produced by burning coal and other flammable materials. The myth response to the electricity question is “hydropower” which provides only about 10% of America’s power needs and is a major portion of the energy market in just one region—the Northwest. But, 38% of Americans see dams as our leading method of electricity production. Hydro, nuclear and solar power account for about 30% of our total energy supply, and yet 55% of Americans—a clear majority—think that most of our energy comes from these non-air-polluting sources.
- ***Pollution of Rivers and Streams***—Only one in five Americans (22%) knows that run-off is the most common form of pollution of streams, rivers and oceans while nearly half (47%) think the most common form is waste dumped by factories. Another 15% of Americans think garbage dumping by cities is the main cause of water pollution.
- ***Recycling of Paper***—When asked about the environmental benefit of recycling paper, the concept of recycling for tree-saving prevails on a 63% basis over the reduction of waste headed for crowded landfills (24%). The general public is highly attuned to the idea that trees are valuable natural resources and habitat for wildlife. The public does not recognize, however, the goal of reducing waste going to landfills as a significant benefit of recycling programs.

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- ***Wildlife Entanglement***—The 1980s images of dead or injured birds or fish entangled in plastic beverage six-pack rings had a great impact; 56% of Americans say the rings are the main cause of fish and wildlife entanglement. However, the main cause of such entanglement, according to the Center for Marine Conservation in Washington, D.C., is abandoned fishing line left by America's 70 million anglers—a fact known by just 10% of Americans.
 - ***Spent Nuclear Fuel***—A total of 34% of Americans believe that the used fuel rods at nuclear plants are safely stored in a deep underground facility in the West. Half as many (17%) know the rods are stored temporarily on the plant site and are monitored pending longer-term solutions. Fully 35% do not know what happens to the spent fuel rods.
 - ***Leading Cause of Childhood Death Worldwide***—Only 9% of the American public understands that micro-organisms in water supplies are the leading cause of childhood death worldwide. The majority of Americans (55%) have most likely been influenced by harrowing public reports of famine and starvation in the world and believe it is a lack of food that causes childhood death more than contaminated water.
 - ***Main Source of Oil in Rivers, Lakes and Bays***—About one in seven Americans (16%) knows that individuals changing motor oil is the main source of oil getting into our surface water, while 40% think (incorrectly) that the source is oil spills from ships and offshore oil wells. Another 17% think it is mostly from discharges from coastal oil refineries.
 - ***Current Source of Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs)***—A CFC ban for aerosol cans took place in 1978 when suspicion grew that the chemical may deplete protective ozone in the Earth's upper atmosphere, and yet 32% of Americans still believe that spray cans are the only source of CFCs in America today. CFCs *are* still in auto air conditioners and refrigerators, yet only 33% of Americans are aware of this fact. Another 9% think styrofoam cups are the only source of CFCs, while 20% of Americans respond that they do not know.
 - ***Greatest Source of Landfill Material***—Nearly one-quarter of Americans (23%) know that paper is the greatest source of landfill material, while 29% think that the disposable diaper is the greatest threat to our crowded landfills.
 - ***Definition of a Watershed***—About two out of five Americans (41%) are able to identify the term watershed as a land area that drains into a specific body of water. Yet, 35% choose not to venture a guess even when presented choices of definitions.

Continued Support for Government's Role in Protecting the Environment

Though they may not believe all the information the government provides about the environment, Americans generally express a desire for the government to remain involved in environmental protection. In fact, over the last few years, attitudes toward the government's intervention in the environment have been supportive and stable. Whether this trend is a permanent change in attitude or a result of the thriving national economy will be determined only over time.

- The majority of the American public (62%) continues to say that environmental protection and economic development can go "hand in hand." A slowly rising minority (28%, statistically unchanged from 1997, but up five percentage points from 1995) believe that a choice must be made between the two spheres.
- When forced to choose one over the other, environmental protection (71%) is considered vastly more important than economic development (17%). In fact, it appears that most of those who say a choice is necessary between the environment and the economy come down on the side of environmental protection (choosing the environment is up eight percentage points since 1995).
- With regard to current laws and regulations protecting the environment, attitudes have been stable since 1995. A plurality (46%) believe current laws do not go far enough. Just under a third say laws have struck about the right balance, while 17% say that the laws currently on the books go too far. Gender and age differences continue to exist, with women and those under the age of 45 more likely to say current laws do not go far enough, and men and those age 45 or older are more likely to say current laws go too far. These attitudes and trends are also evident when the public is asked about five specific areas of regulation: water pollution, air pollution, protection of wild or natural areas, protection of wetlands and protection of endangered species of plants, animals and insects.
- Endangered species seems to be a "hot button" for those who dislike current environmental regulations. While 18% of all Americans say that laws protecting endangered species go too far, among those who think environmental laws in general go too far, 51% think regulations protecting endangered species go too far, for a difference of 33 percentage points. By way of comparison, those who think environmental regulations overall go too far are 24 points more likely than the national average to think that laws protecting wetlands go too far; 24 points more likely to have this opinion of laws protecting wild or natural areas; 21 points more likely to feel laws to fight air pollution go too far; and 12 points more likely to hold this belief about laws to fight water pollution.
- Concern about the planet's future remains high: a majority of Americans (57%) continue to agree that "the next 10 years are the last decade when humans will have a chance to save the earth from environmental catastrophe." This concern has risen since 1995 by ten percentage points (from 47% to 57%).

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- Even when Government does not play a role, Americans may assume it does. Fully 65%—or two out of three—Americans assume (incorrectly) that household and industrial chemicals are routinely tested by the Environmental Protection Agency or some other government agency.
 - Some 59% of Americans say (incorrectly) that tap water is routinely tested and filtered to remove contamination from livestock and pesticide run-off.
 - More than half of Americans (51%) say (incorrectly) that bottled water is tested for safety and purity by a government agency. Just 42% of Americans know it is not tested.

The Impact of a Higher Level of Environmental Knowledge on Environmental Attitudes

The *1998 NEETF/Roper Survey* looked at prevailing environmental myths to determine their persistence and whether they are actually blocking a more appropriate up-to-date focus on current environmental problems. Because the average mean response on the

1998 NEETF/Roper Survey myths quiz was 2.2 correct answers (out of ten questions), we formed a low-knowledge group at three or fewer correct responses and a high-knowledge group of four or more correct responses. Each group's responses were then compared on key questions:

- On the question of whether the environment and the economy can go hand in hand, there was little difference between the high-environmental-knowledge group (65%) and low-environmental-knowledge group (62%) with the majority of both groups believing a balance can be found between the environment and the economy.
- On whether one would pick the environment or the economy if one must choose between them, 73% of the low-knowledge group would pick the environment as compared to 66% of the high-knowledge group.
- On whether environmental regulation has gone too far, not far enough or has achieved the right balance, the most telling difference between the high-knowledge and low-knowledge groups is between those who feel that the right balance has been achieved. A total of 29% of the low-knowledge group thinks there is balance while 35% of the high-knowledge group sees regulation as having achieved balance.
- On air pollution regulation, the low-knowledge group is five percentage points (at 61%) more likely than the high-knowledge group (56%) to think that regulation of air pollution has not gone far enough and nine percentage points less likely (24% versus 33%) to think that balanced air pollution regulation has been achieved.
- On the regulation of wild or natural areas, there is no statistical difference between the high-knowledge and low-knowledge groups.

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- On the regulation of endangered species, there are considerable differences between the high- and low-knowledge groups. A total of 15% of the low-knowledge group feel endangered species regulation has gone too far, while 23% of the high-knowledge group hold that belief. Correspondingly, 47% of the low-knowledge group feel that endangered species regulation should go further as compared to 40% of the high-knowledge group.
 - On water pollution regulation, 73% of the low-knowledge group think that water pollution regulation should go further, while 63% of the high-knowledge group have that feeling. And, 18% of the low-knowledge group feel the right balance has been achieved, and 30% of the high-knowledge group have that belief.
 - On whether we face an environmental catastrophe in the next ten years, 59% of the low-knowledge group agrees we could face a catastrophe in the next ten years compared to 47% of the high-knowledge group.

Environmental Activities

Whether they realize it or not, many Americans perform activities each day that benefit the environment. Some conserve water, others volunteer time and effort to clean up public lands, and others simply recycle some of the products and containers they use everyday. These activities are important because they involve Americans in the environment and its protection, (even if only through indirect means) and are part of the Concern - Education - Behavior nexus developed in the last two NEETF/Roper studies.

- Asked the frequency with which they do each of 11 environmental activities, a majority of the public performs the following four “frequently”: turning off lights and appliances when leaving a room (85%); recycling things such as newspapers, cans and glass (65%); trying to cut down on the amount of trash and garbage their household creates (62%); and conserving water in their home and yard (61%).
- It should be noted that each of the most frequently engaged activities can be done around the household and is not necessarily linked directly with the environment. By comparison, activities that directly reflect concern about the environment are performed frequently by no more than one American in ten.
- There is a definite relationship between environmental knowledge, concerns and behaviors. For nine of the eleven activities that benefit the environment, the likelihood that people perform each activity frequently increases proportionately with their environmental knowledge. The only exceptions are turning off lights and appliances (which nearly everyone does) and the use of alternative forms of transportation (which may depend more on regional infrastructure and availability than concern about the environment).
- Clearly, concern about and knowledge of the environment do have an effect on the likelihood of engaging in day-to-day activities that directly or indirectly benefit the

environment. Thus, increasing environmental knowledge for all Americans should increase individual involvement in environmental affairs, and should help Americans to understand the impact of decisions affecting the environment.

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