

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

The first Earth Day, in 1970, was both the outcome of growing public concern for the environment and the impetus for increasing public action directed toward its protection. An estimated 20 million people participated in peaceful demonstrations across the country, with thousands of public and private schools at all levels from elementary schools to colleges engaging in programs and “teach-ins.” Prior to that time, there had been only modest interest in the conservation of natural resources and in efforts to decrease the threat to public health of air and water pollution, but broad-based interest in environmental quality had not captured the public’s attention.

Within months of the outpouring of support for “Mother Earth” that was expressed in the national celebration of Earth Day, 1970, public policy shifted to concerted efforts to preserve and enhance the environment. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was established with its mission to protect the environment and public health. The US and Canada entered into a cooperative commitment to clean up the Great Lakes. Congress passed a series of acts directed toward cleaning up water supplies, reducing air pollution, protecting endangered species, conserving fossil fuel resources, regulating the disposal of hazardous waste materials, and cleaning up heavily polluted sites. Individual states developed recycling programs for metal, glass, and paper products, and focused attention on regulating landfills, reclaiming land contaminated by mine drainage, preserving wetlands, forests, wildlife habitats and farm resources. Environmental organizations, grew rapidly in membership, with many developing aggressive watchdog programs directed to protecting and preserving various environmental resources and educating the public. Even businesses, conscious of consumer and investor values, sought to increase their competitive advantages by promoting themselves as environmentally friendly as industrial pollutants came to be recognized as not only wasted resources, but also public relations problems and legal liabilities.

In the intervening three decades since the first Earth Day, much progress has been made in protecting and enhancing environmental quality in the US and around the world. Some believe that if we continue with current policies, or even relax some of the most restrictive measures, society will achieve its environmental goals. However, others argue that efforts to date remain woefully inadequate, and much greater emphasis needs to be given in the future to environmental issues.

How do Pennsylvanians view the future importance of practices and policies directed to environmental protection in the years ahead? How have these views changed across time? What are the most important areas of environmental concern of residents of the Commonwealth today?

The Citizens' Viewpoint Surveys

A statewide survey of 4183 Pennsylvania residents carried out by the Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology at Penn State in 2001 assessed public perceptions and attitudes about a variety of state and local issues. Data from this study provide some information on the priority that residents believe should be given to environmental conservation and protection in the years ahead and the relative importance of specific environmental concerns. More limited data collected from similar Citizens' Viewpoint surveys in 1990 and 1980 provide additional information for analyzing the changes in perceived priority across time.

Comparing 1980, 1990, 2001 Views

In all three Citizens' Viewpoint surveys, subjects were asked: "Compared to what is being done now, what priority do you want protection and conservation of the natural environment to have in the future?" Possible responses were: lower priority, the same priority, higher priority, and don't know (see Table 1).

- In 2001, 55% of Pennsylvanians indicated that protection and conservation of the natural environment should be given higher priority in the future; 38% indicated that the priority should be the same as currently; only 5% reported that the priority should be lower, and 2% indicated that they did not know.
- In both 1980 and 1990, the proportions of persons indicating that a higher priority was called for were considerably greater. In 1980, 79% of Pennsylvania residents indicated that protection and conservation of the natural environment was deserving of higher priority in the future. By 1990, that figure had declined slightly to 74%.

Two other items related to pollution issues asking about whether the priority given in the future should be lower, higher, or the same as currently, were included in both the 1990 and 2001 surveys (but not in the 1980 study). For both of these items, there was also considerable decline in the proportion of persons reporting that a higher priority was needed.

- Safe and efficient sewage disposal received a 71% "higher priority" rating in 1990; by 2001 that figure had declined to 53%. However, only 2% indicated that a lower priority was appropriate even in 2001.

- In 1990, 85% of Pennsylvanians reported that a higher priority should be given to safe disposal of industrial wastes. In 2001, that percentage had dropped to 66% with 30% reporting that the same priority should be maintained in the future..

Although the decline in the relative priority that Pennsylvanians gave to these environmental issues could reflect a declining concern by the citizenry in environmental issues, it seems more likely that a sizeable number of residents believed that a continuation of current policies is sufficient to address environmental needs in the coming years.

Specific Environmental Concerns

When asked to indicate whether each of a list of specific environmental issues should receive high, medium, or low priority in the future, Pennsylvanians were most likely to support issues connected with water quality and food safety.

- 71% gave high priority ratings to monitoring and regulating drinking water quality; 25% felt this was of medium priority, 3% rated it as of low priority and just 1% did not know how they felt.
- 65% felt that improving the water quality of streams and lakes should have high priority, while 30% rated this as an area of medium priority; 4% gave it a low priority rating and the remainder (1%) did not know.
- 65% reported that monitoring and regulating food production and processing to ensure food safety was an item of high priority; 29% gave it medium priority; 5% reported a low priority rating and 1% didn't know.

Pennsylvanians expressed the need to preserve natural and traditional land use patterns both for their amenity value and for the protection of wildlife.

- 61% felt that high priority should be given the strengthening landfill regulations.
- 60% reported that high priority should be given to preserving woodlands and wilderness areas.
- 56% gave high priority to encouraging the preservation of farmland.
- 54% indicated that the protection of fish and game habitats for the preservation of nature should have high priority. A slightly smaller percentage (46%) indicated

that such preservation should be for “fishing and hunting.”

- 55% reported that high priority should be given to providing growth boundaries around built up areas to protect the countryside from development.

Support for strengthening regulations or environmental standards in most areas were somewhat less likely to receive high priority ratings.

- Strengthening environmental regulation of industries was rated as an issue of high priority by 51% of Pennsylvanians.
- Strengthening regulation of mining and drilling to reduce drainage and cave-ins received a 47% high priority rating.
- Strengthening environmental regulation of agriculture was given a high priority rating by only 36% of Pennsylvanians.
- Reducing storm water runoff and flooding garnered a 43% high priority rating, with about the same percentage (43%) giving it a medium priority rating.

Community participation in environmental efforts was viewed as important and worthy of support.

- 54% felt that high priority should be given to mandating recycling for all Pennsylvania communities.
- 52% reported that providing incentives for community environmental cleanup should be an item of high priority in the future.
- 41% felt that high priority should be given to helping communities pay for water and sewage treatment.

There was less agreement on the extent to which priority should be given to the remaining issues addressed in the survey.

- Just 37% felt that high priority should be given to requiring higher anti-pollution standards for all cars and trucks; 20% gave this item low priority.
- 36% felt that restricting billboards along state highways was an item of high priority, but nearly as many (32%) felt that this should be of low priority.

- 35% reported high priority ratings for requiring a statewide deposit on cans and bottles; 36% indicated that this was a low priority issue.
- Responses were equally divided with 33% high and 33% low priority ratings for prohibiting ATVs and snowmobiles from using state forest roads.

Personal Characteristics Related to Differences in Citizens Views

Women were somewhat more likely than men to indicate that high priority should be given to most environmental issues. Among the most pronounced differences were the following:

- 69% of the women while 60% of the men reported that high priority should be given to the monitoring and regulating of food production and processing.
- 39% of the women and 29% of the men gave high priority ratings to strengthening environmental regulations of agriculture.
- 38% of the women but just 29% of the men surveyed felt that high priority should be given to requiring anti-pollution standards for all cars and trucks.

Age was positively associated with an increasing proportion of high priority ratings for almost all environmental issues. The most pronounced differences by age were:

- Monitoring and regulating food production and processing to ensure food safety was given a high priority rating by 73% of those 65 years and older; 58% of the respondents less than 45 years of age reported that this was an issue of high priority.
- Reducing storm water runoff and flooding was given a high priority rating by 31% of those subjects less than 45 years of age but by 57% of those 65 years and older.
- 59% of the respondents 65 years of age and over reported that high priority should be given to strengthening regulation of mining and drilling to reduce drainage and cave-ins, but only 37% of those less than 45 years responded this way.
- As age increased, the proportion of respondents who felt that high priority should be given to restricting billboards along state roads increased from 20% for those under 45 years of age to 46% of those 65 years and older.

- Only 19% of those less than 45 years gave high priority to prohibiting ATVs and snowmobiles from using state forest roads; for those 65 years or over, 42% gave high priority to this issue.

For most issues, as education increased, the proportion of respondents indicating that an environmental issue should be given high priority declined, but in general these differences were not great. Among the most important differences were:

- Monitoring and regulating food production and processing to ensure food safety was given a high priority rating by 76% of those with less than a high school education and 70% of those who terminated their formal schooling with high school graduation, compared with 61% of those with some college and 55% of the college graduates.
- 56% of those who did not complete high school and 47% of high school graduates gave high priority to reducing storm water run-off, compared with 34% of the college graduates.
- 57% of the high school dropouts indicated that high priority should be given to preserving fish and game habitats for hunting but that percentage declined to 40% for college graduates.
- 49% of those with less than a high school education and 46% of those who graduated but reported no post-secondary education reported that high priority should be given to helping communities pay for water and sewage treatment facilities. Only 35% of the college graduates gave high priority to this issue.
- High priority ratings for preserving farmland declined from 69% for those with less than high school graduation to 52% for college graduates.

As household income increased, the percentage of high priority responses declined for most items. Thus, for example:

- Support for strengthening environmental regulation of industry declined from 56% for those with less than \$20,000 income to 43% for those earning \$80,000 or more.
- Strengthening regulations of mining and drilling to reduce cave-ins received a high priority rating of 57% from those with less than \$20,000, but this figure declined to just 33% for subjects earning \$80,000 or more.

- 56% of the respondents earning less than \$20,000 felt that high priority should be given to reducing storm water run-off and flooding, but only 34% of those with \$80,000 and over incomes felt this way.
- Strengthening regulation of landfills was given a high priority by 66% of those earning less than \$20,000. As income increased, that percentage declined with just 50% of those with incomes of \$80,000 or more reporting such high priority ratings.
- 51% of those with less than \$20,000 in household income but only 32% of those with \$80,000 income reported that high priority should be given to helping communities pay for water and sewage treatment facilities.

Differences among urban, suburban, and rural residents in the priority given to the various environmental concerns were generally small. A few exceptions to this general pattern were noteworthy:

- Urban residents (44%) were the most likely to give high priority to requiring higher anti-pollution standards for all cars and trucks, followed by suburban residents (34%), with rural residents (27%) the least likely to do so.
- Rural residents were more likely (62%) than either suburban (52%) or urban (50%) residents to give high priority to preserving farmland.
- Urban (70%) and suburban (65%) were more likely than rural (50%) to feel that high priority should be given to monitoring and regulating food production and processing to ensure food safety.

Summary

The proportion of the public who saw the need for higher priority to be given to environmental concerns declined sharply across the last two decades, but support for environmental protection remained high. The need to monitor, regulate, and improve food and water quality were issues of concern by the overwhelming majority of state residents. There was also widespread support for protecting the countryside from development, preserving woodlands and wilderness areas and maintaining agricultural lands. Strengthening or maintaining regulations on landfills, industries, and mining/drilling operations and reducing storm water run-off were also endorsed by substantial proportions of the population. Support for strengthening environmental regulation was more equivocal. Support for requiring higher anti-polluting

standards for all cars and trucks, restricting billboards along state highways, requiring a statewide deposit on cans and bottles and prohibiting ATVs and snowmobiles on state forest roads was much lower with many people feeling these concerns should have only low priority.

Fern K. (Bunny) Willits
<http://www.aers.psu.edu/d/fac/willits.htm>

(814-863-8647)

(fkw@psu.edu)

The Pennsylvania State University is committed to the policy that all persons shall have equal access to programs, facilities, admission, and employment without regard to personal characteristics not related to ability, performance, or qualifications as determined by University policy or by state or federal authorities. It is the policy of the University to maintain an academic and work environment free of discrimination, including harassment. The Pennsylvania State University prohibits discrimination and harassment against any person because of age, ancestry, color, disability or handicap, national origin, race, religious creed, sex, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Discrimination or harassment against faculty, staff, or students will not be tolerated at The Pennsylvania State University. Direct all inquiries regarding the nondiscrimination policy to the Affirmative Action Director, The Pennsylvania State University, 201 Willard Building, University Park, PA 16802-2801, Tel 814-865-4700/V, 814-863-1150/TTY.

Table 1. Priority Given to Various Environmental Issues

	1 Low		2 Medium		3 High		4 Don't Know		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Monitor and regulate public drinking water quality	119	3.0	1006	25.3	2817	70.8	38	.9	3980
Improve the water quality of streams & lakes	148	3.7	1189	29.8	2594	65.0	62	1.6	3993
Monitor/regulate food production & processing to ensure food safety	194	4.9	1133	28.6	2590	65.4	42	1.1	3959
Strengthen regulation of landfills	233	6.0	1178	30.2	2355	60.5	128	3.3	3894
Preserve woodland/wilderness areas	246	6.2	1272	31.8	2406	60.2	70	1.8	3995
Encourage the preservation of farmland	416	10.5	1213	30.6	2221	56.0	116	2.9	3967
Protect wildlife habitats for the preservation of nature	383	9.6	1403	35.2	2131	53.5	64	1.6	3980
Preserve fish & game habitats for fishing/hunting	596	15.0	1472	37.0	1841	46.3	71	1.8	3979
Create growth boundaries to protect the countryside from development	397	10.0	1201	30.3	2174	54.8	198	5.0	3970
Strengthen environmental regulation of industries	359	9.1	1454	36.8	2012	50.9	131	3.3	3956
Strengthen regulation of mining/drilling to reduce drainage & cave ins	450	11.3	1367	34.4	1868	47.0	286	7.2	3971
Strengthen environmental regulation of agriculture	592	14.9	1754	44.2	1436	36.2	187	4.7	3969
Reduce storm water runoff and flooding	394	9.9	1653	41.5	1765	44.3	171	4.3	3983
Mandate recycling for all PA communities	684	17.1	1053	26.4	2163	54.1	95	2.4	3995
Provide incentives for community environmental cleanup	362	9.1	1471	37.0	2071	52.0	74	1.9	3979
Help communities pay for water/sewage treatment facilities	543	13.6	1684	42.2	1623	40.6	145	3.6	3994
Require higher anti-pollution standards for all cars & trucks	795	20.0	1629	40.9	1479	37.1	82	2.0	3984
Restrict billboards along state roads	1265	32.0	1121	28.4	1403	35.5	165	4.2	3954
Require statewide deposit on cans and bottles	1413	35.5	966	24.3	1373	34.5	226	5.7	3977
Prohibit ATVs & snowmobiles from using state forest roads	1325	33.3	988	24.9	1329	33.4	334	8.4	3976