

'We Are Worried': The World's Peoples Voice Their Environmental Concerns

In the spring of 1991, the Gallup International Institute approached the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF-International) with a proposal for what was probably the most comprehensive poll ever to be made of people's attitudes towards environmental issues. Already engaged in annual opinion-polling in many countries, WWF decided also to co-sponsor this 22-nations 'Health of the Planet' Gallup Survey, because accurate information is so vital to achieving environmental protection.

Of course, information is only the start of a process. Information leads to raised awareness, that leads to concern — which in turn should lead to action. The Survey's results are indeed enlightening on the vital topics of people's awareness and depth of concern. However, when it comes to the final step, namely action, while some activities may lie within the capabilities of individuals, much action still remains the responsibility of NGOs such as IUCN and WWF, as well as of governments, industry, and international agencies. Hence our need to know what is actually on people's minds.

People Profoundly Concerned

In country after country, both in the Gallup poll and in WWF surveys (conducted by Market & Opinion Research International, MORI), environmental concerns now rank as one of the most serious problems that people perceive as confronting them — and, with even greater concern expressed — confronting their children.

Among the Survey's other significant findings is that neither the peoples of the North nor those of the South are exclusively blaming the other for the world's environmental problems, even if their governments' spokespersons are often inclined to do so.

People Prepared to Pay More

Most surprising perhaps is the finding that the citizens of the world, both South and North, are prepared to pay more for their goods and services in order to protect the environment. This particular attitude is, however, qualified by findings from WWF in-depth interviews with food-industry executives, who note that what people claim to believe, and how they actually react and/or spend their money, can sometimes be at odds. The analogous example often cited is that of the public praising the importance of products' nutritional value, yet doing their actual purchasing mainly on the basis of a product's taste. The food industry spokesmen saw a similar trend with packaging: 'buying trends do not yet match stated beliefs'.

The above information presents a clear case for further public education action from NGOs such as IUCN and WWF. As manufacturers openly admit, public opinion and market pressures, even more than legislation, will determine industry practices — particularly in highly-developed consumer cultures.

Global Problems also Personally Threatening

Overwhelmingly, individuals interviewed in all pertinent surveys have agreed that environmental issues were rarely just local issues; indeed, in most countries, the most serious issues were considered global or at least transnational. Ranked in order of importance, majorities were most concerned with destruction of the rain-forests, global warming, and pollution (of air and water).

However, no matter how vast the issue of concern, most people felt personally threatened. Two WWF survey focus-group comments were typical: 'Antarctica may be far away, but there's rubbish right outside my house too' (Italy); 'If the environment goes to hell, nothing will help — you just can't escape the environment' (Sweden).

Who Has Responsibility?

When asked about the cause of environmental problems within developing nations, people in those countries prove to be just as likely to cite 'overpopulation' within their own countries, as developed nations' residents are likely to view developing nations as 'overpopulated' and therefore environmentally threatened and threatening.

Regarding responsibility for action, while majorities in most nations see governments as having primary responsibility for environmental protection, they believe that individual citizens and groups such as IUCN, WWF, and Friends of the Earth, also have significant positive effects. Residents of poorer nations are most likely, however, to view citizen action as almost the only reliable action, because they see government as distant and ineffective.

When asked what was their most favoured form of environmentally positive individual action, in more than three-quarters of the countries a majority reported *avoiding products harmful to the environment*. Consuming differently, rather than less, emerged as the environmentally correct behaviour of choice.

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Peoples' Challenge, Peoples' Support

The voices of the world's peoples, raised so clearly on these issues of environmental concern, at once challenge and provide opportunities of action for all governments and NGOs. In spite of what for many were disappointing official results of the United Nations Conference on Environment & Development (UNCED), held recently at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, awareness and concern have clearly intensified, and it is at long-last becoming recognized by more than a few far-sighted academics that our world — actually The Biosphere, as emphasized in the declaration of Biosphere Day — is becoming more and more gravely threatened.

Such polling survey results should actively stiffen our resolve to persevere in our efforts. We who work in environmental conservation can proceed with even greater confidence now that we have the world's peoples backing us. In labouring to preserve the Earth's biodiversity, in promoting sustainable living for the benefit of all the world's life, and in safeguarding The Biosphere as our own and all other forms of life's only natural home, we must never cease to strive for our ultimate goal of stopping, and eventually reversing, the still-increasing degradation of our planet's natural environment — due, basically, to human population-pressures and profligacy.

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Finally I come to what for me is the most basic matter needing both education to comprehend, and communication to grasp, its vast and vital significance. Although several of our otherwise excellent speakers have touched on it, I have listened in vain for any serious attempt at tackling it, though Dr Batisse assures me that he will be doing so. The basic factor to which I refer is *human population*, and the basic problem is the absolute need to control its exorbitant increases and widespread profligacy. The only foreseeable alternative to effective world-wide family planning is appalling famine or other global and ghastly catastrophe such as collapse of The Biosphere.

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