

CESTP Survey of Environmental Knowledge and Concerns in Northeast Ohio

THE STUDY

The Communication Research Center at Cleveland State University, under the supervision of Dr. Kimberly Neuendorf, completed a survey of 300 Northeast Ohio residents regarding their orientations toward a variety of environmental issues. The CATI (computer-aided telephone interviewing) survey, conducted for the Center for Environmental Science, Technology, and Policy at Cleveland State University, polled adults in the six-county Cleveland Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) during May and June of 2004. The demographic profile of the respondents closely matched the general population with regard to gender, race, age, and county of residence. The median age was 48 years, and the sample was 58% female and 79% White (with 13% African American and 8% Other).

GENERAL FINDINGS

The survey revealed a pattern of general interest in environmental issues. An open-ended question asking respondents to name the two most serious problems in their own community found the top-ranked responses to be (1) educa-

tion and schools, (2) jobs, (3) other economic concerns, and (4) environmental problems and taxes (tie). Other less frequently mentioned problems included politics, crime, roads, drugs, health issues, and ethics. Four additional response categories—land development, urbanization, sewage/septic problems, and flooding—show respondent interest in environmental topics. When these categories are added to the main category of “environmental problems,” it demonstrates that nearly a third (31%) of respondents indicate at least one environmental topic as one of their community’s most serious problems.

The respondents reported strong support for environmental protections, even at the cost of economic development. More than half—59%—reported that they feel that “we’re spending too little. . . money on improving and protecting the environment.” With regard to protecting endangered species, a full 72% agreed with the statement, “Endangered species should be protected, even if it limits some land development or other economic activities.” And, 58% agreed with the statement, “Endangered species should be protected, even at the expense of economic activities.” When asked whether they were “for” or “against” paying an additional \$5 on their water bill “for new sewers to prevent polluted runoff from spilling into waterways,” 70% indicated “for.” Showing that the respondents overwhelmingly do not believe that there must be a “trade-off” between environmental protection and economic health, a full 92% agreed with the statement, “We can have it both ways—we can protect the environment and enjoy economic growth.”

There was also clear support for pollution controls, with 59% in disagreement that “Pollution control measures have created costs that are unfair to industry.” Half of the respondents (50%) agreed that “We should continue our efforts to control pollution, even if this slows down our efforts to improve the economy and reduce unemployment.”

Several questions were asked both for the State of Ohio and for the respondent’s own com-



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OF THE 300 RESPONDENTS RANDOMLY SELECTED FROM THE CLEVELAND MSA:

59% THINK WE ARE SPENDING TOO LITTLE ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

59.7% DISAGREE WITH THE STATEMENT THAT POLLUTION CONTROL COSTS HAVE BEEN UNFAIR TO INDUSTRY

71% THOUGHT ENDANGERED SPECIES SHOULD BE PROTECTED EVEN IF IT LIMITED SOME LAND DEVELOPMENT OR ECONOMIC GROWTH

57.7% AGREED THAT ENDANGERED SPECIES SHOULD BE PROTECTED EVEN AT THE EXPENSE OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES.

92% AGREED WITH THE STATEMENT THAT WE CAN HAVE IT BOTH WAYS: PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AND ENJOYING ECONOMIC GROWTH

70% WOULD SUPPORT AN ADDED CHARGE OF \$5 ON THEIR WATER BILL FOR NEW SEWERS TO PREVENT POLLUTION FROM ENTERING WATERWAYS

80% THOUGHT POLLUTION OF LAKES STREAMS OR COASTAL AREAS IS A SOMEWHAT SERIOUS OR VERY SERIOUS PROBLEM IN OHIO

45% THOUGHT IT SOMEWHAT OR VERY SERIOUS IN THEIR COMMUNITY

community. Here, a pattern of “not in my community” was evident. The percentage of respondents who reported air pollution to be a somewhat serious or serious problem in the State of Ohio was 73%; for one’s own community, it was 33%. For the management of hazardous wastes, the percentages were: State of Ohio—64%, Own community—24%. With regard to the pollution of lakes streams, or coastal areas: State



of Ohio—80%, Own community—46%. And with regard to exposure to toxic substances such as lead paint, asbestos, mercury, or pesticides: State of Ohio—66%, Own community—37%.

BREAKDOWNS BY DEMOGRAPHICS

The study found few significant differences in responses to environmental questions among those of varying demographic profiles. Differences that a number of years ago would have been typical—e.g., those with greater education exhibiting a greater degree of support for environmental protections—were not generally apparent in this study. Support for the environment seems fairly universal across gender, race, age, and education groups.

Some significant differences did occur—males were somewhat more protective of jobs, disagreeing more with the statement, “We should think of jobs first, and environmental protection second.” Caucasians were somewhat less concerned with hazardous wastes and with toxic substances in their own communities. Older respondents (aged 61-92) were significantly less willing to pay “more tax monies to protect wilderness areas for endangered species.” And, the least educated group (high school graduate or less) exhibited the greatest concern over the economic impact of environmental controls, agreeing more frequently with the statement “Pollution control measures have created costs that are unfair to industry,” and declaring greater support for “relaxing environmental regulations to improve the local economy.”

BREAKDOWNS BY LIFESTYLE, MEDIA FACTORS

When the area in which the respondent resides is taken into account, some clear differences are apparent. Those living in the city of Cleveland did differ substantially from those in outlying areas with regard to several environmental indicators. First, they were much more likely to report that pollution is a somewhat or very serious problem in their community. Cleveland residents were also significantly more likely to report a serious problem with (1) exposure to toxic substances such as lead paint, asbestos, mercury, or pesticides in Ohio and in their community, (2) air pollution in their community, (3) the management of hazardous wastes in their community, and (4) the pollution of lakes, streams, or coastal areas in their community. Cleveland residents, on the other hand, were significantly less willing to pay an additional \$5 on their water bill for “new sewers to prevent polluted runoff from spilling into waterways” (although a majority of Clevelanders—59.5%--did express a willingness to pay more).

When analyzed against media exposure habits (TV viewership and newspaper readership), responses to the survey did not vary systematically. Thus, there was no relationship found between how much TV area residents watch and how they feel about environmental issues in the region. Nor was there a relationship found between level of newspaper readership and environmental attitudes.

For Further Information
Contact the
**CENTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL
SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & POLICY**

Stuart Schwartz, Ph.D. - Director
Cleveland State University
2121 Euclid Avenue, MC219
Cleveland, Ohio 44115
Phone: (216) 687-4860
FAX: (216) 687-5393
E-mail: csucestp@csuohio.edu