

BELDEN & RUSSONELLO
RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS

**Current Trends in Public Opinion on the Environment:
Environmental Compendium Update**

January 1996

Introduction

In the Spring of 1995, Communications Consortium Media Center commissioned Belden & Russonello (B&R) to compile a compendium of existing survey data on environmental issues.

The following memo highlights the trends we found in the data from 1992 to 1995 collected for the compendium. This memo looks at public opinion on the environment in five main areas: 1) attitudes regarding environmentalism and the environmental movement, 2) the public's assessment of the state of the environment, 3) the priority currently assigned to the environment by the public, 4) the environmental issues of most concern, and 5) the role of government in environmental protection.

A final section of this memo briefly looks at some of the surveys conducted in late 1995 which focus on particular current public policy debate.

In looking for existing research sources to update the compendium, B&R located public opinion data compiled since March 1995 at The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. (The center is a nonprofit research library which houses the most complete database of publicly available survey research materials.) We also obtained a number of private studies directly from other survey organizations and interest groups, to which we are greatly indebted.

Americans' Attitudes Regarding Environmentalism and the Environmental Movement

The American public expresses much goodwill for the environmental movement, but this goodwill is in jeopardy.

- Environmental organizations enjoy more public confidence in their ability to protect the environment than do other institutions and individuals. A third have a great deal of confidence in environmental organizations to protect the environment. This is almost twice as many as those who have a great deal of confidence in state and local governments and more than four times as many as those who have a great deal of confidence in the Republican controlled Congress to protect the environment.

How much confidence do you have in the ability of ... to protect the environment? (Louis Harris and Associates, November 1995, N=1007 adults)

	Great Deal	Only Some	Hardly Any	DK
Environmental groups like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society	33%	51	13	2
EPA	22%	66	11	1
Vice President Gore	18%	56	24	1
President Clinton	16%	64	19	1
State and local governments	16%	69	14	*
Business	7%	46	45	2
Republican controlled Congress	7%	55	36	2

- About three-quarters of the public since 1992 have consistently described themselves as either “active environmentalists” or “sympathetic toward environmental concerns but not active.”

However, the percentage of Americans who say they consider themselves to be “active environmentalists” is now 21%, down from 29% saying so in 1992. (Roper Starch April 1995)

- In addition, skepticism about environmental organizations has increased over the past few years. In 1991, 28% said “environmental groups exaggerate threats to get attention,” but in 1993 and 1994, 42% said so. (Wirthlin August 1994)

In recent years, interest in the environment has increased. Do you think of yourself as an active environmentalist, or sympathetic toward environmental concerns but not active, or neutral, or generally unsympathetic to environmental concerns? (Roper Starch Worldwide, April 1995, N= 1003 adults)

	1995	1994	1993	1992
Active environmentalist	21%	23%	21%	29%
Sympathetic but not active		51	56	55
Neutral	22	16	20	15
Unsympathetic	3	2	2	2
Don't know	3	3	2	2

Lately, there has been a lot of talk about threats to the environment. In general, do you think environmental groups are exaggerating these threats in order to get the public to pay attention to them, or do you think these threats to the environment are as serious as the environmental groups say they are? (Wirthlin Group, August 1994, N= 1014 adults; July 1993, N= 1036 adults; June 1991, N= 1000 adults)

	1994	1993	1991
Threats are exaggerated	42%	42%	28%
Threats are serious	48	54	66
Don't know	10	4	6

Are We Making Progress? -- The public's assessment of the state of the environment

The public is generally optimistic about the state of the environment where they live, and consider the environment in the country, as a whole, passable. Americans believe that we are making some progress on the environmental problems that persist, but apparently not fast enough to ensure an optimistic long term outlook.

- Six in 10 Americans (62%) believe the quality of the environment where they live is excellent or good, and four in 10 (42%) say the environment in the country is “excellent” or “pretty good” with 40% saying it is “only fair” and 17% saying it is “poor.” (Hart December 1994 and Harris April 1995)
- Four in 10 (43%) people believe we are making progress on the problem of environmental pollution compared to the 30% who believe we are losing ground. This is an increase of 11 percentage points over the past few years in the percentage believing we are making progress on the environment. In 1994, 37% said we were making progress and 34% said we were losing ground, and in 1989 32% said we were making progress and 42% said we are losing ground on the environment. (Times Mirror April 1995)
- But, three-quarters of the public (75%) believe that pollution and the environment will get significantly worse in their lifetime. And looking to the future, a plurality (42%) believes the environment will get worse by the year 2000 while 38% say it will stay the same and only 20% say it will improve. (Wirthlin July 1993 and Harris April 1995)

Next, as I read you some problem areas, please tell me how you think each is affecting this **country** today. Do you think it is about the same today, is the country making progress in this area, or is the country losing ground? (Princeton Survey Research Associates, conducted for Times Mirror, April 1995, N=1800 adults; March 1994, N=2001 adults; March 1989)

Base: Half of the sample (1995); quarter of the sample (1994)

	About same	Making progress	Losing ground	DK
Political corruption	41%	12	44	3
1994	39%	12	46	3
Conflict among racial, religious or ethnic groups	36%	27	35	2
1994	32%	21	41	3
The way the health care system is working	30%	14	53	3
1994	31%	16	49	4
Poverty, hunger and homelessness	30%	11	57	2
1994	32%	9	56	3
1989	23%	22	53	2
The cost of living	28%	9	61	2
1994	32%	8	59	1
Environmental pollution	26%	43	30	1
1994	26%	37	34	3
1989	20%	32	42	6
AIDS	22%	25	48	5
1994	22%	23	49	6
1989	17%	38	40	5
Drugs	22%	10	66	2
1994	22%	13	62	3
1989	12%	17	69	2
Low moral and ethical standards	20%	7	70	3
1994	29%	6	63	2
Crime	13%	9	77	1
1994	15%	7	77	1
1989	19%	15	64	2

Environment Continues to be a Priority, But Not a Top Tier Concern

A majority of Americans today continue to support tough environmental regulations and spending on environmental protection, even though this majority is smaller than it was in the early 1990's and other issues are more compelling for the public.

- For the past couple of years, three-quarters of Americans have agreed with the statement "this country should do whatever it takes to protect the environment," with almost two-thirds agreeing strongly (65%) with this statement this fall.

As I read each pair tell me whether the first statement or the second statement comes closer to your own views -- even if neither is exactly right. (Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, October 1995, N= 2000 adults, April 1995, N= 1800 adults, July 1994, N= 3800 adults)

	Oct. '95	April '95	July '94
This country should do whatever it takes to protect the environment			
Strongly agree	65%	63%	
Somewhat agree	12 } 77%	11 } 74%	}78%
This country has gone too far in its efforts to protect the environment			
Strongly agree	13	15	
Somewhat agree	7 } 20	7 } 22	}19
Neither/Don't know	3	4	3

- Support for government regulations and spending on the environment has shrunk some. Yet, the support remains sizable as the following questions from Times Mirror surveys illustrate.

There needs to be stricter laws and regulations to protect the environment. (Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, July 1994, N=3800 adults; June 1992, N=3517 adults)

	1994	1992
Completely agree	46%	55%
Mostly agree	36 } 82%	35 } 90%
Mostly disagree	13	7
Completely disagree	4 } 17	2 } 9
Don't know	1	1

People should be willing to pay higher prices in order to protect the environment. (Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, July 1994, N=3800 adults; May 1993, N=1507 adults; June 1992, N=3517 adults)

	1994	1993	1992
Completely agree	17%	12%	26%
Mostly agree	40 } 57%	45 } 57%	41 } 67%
Mostly disagree	28	31	22
Completely disagree	14 } 42	10 } 41	10 } 32
Don't know	1	2	1

- Support for increased spending on the environment, which increased in the 1980's has begun to decline. The General Social Survey and Times Mirror Surveys provides useful tracking questions on the public's support for environmental spending.

We are faced with many problems in this country, none of which can be solved easily or inexpensively. I'm going to name some of these problems, and for each one I'd like you to tell me whether you think we're spending too much money on it, too little money, or about the right amount: Improving and protecting the environment. (National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey, 1980 - 1994)

	Too Little	About Right	Too Much
1994	59%	29	8
1993	59%	32	10
1991	70%	25	5
1990	75%	20	5
1989	75%	21	4
1988	68%	28	5
1987	63%	31	6
1985	59%	33	8
1984	61%	34	5
1983	58%	33	9
1982	53%	35	12
1980	51%	33	16

If you were making up the federal budget this year would you increase spending for... decrease spending for... or keep spending the same for this. (Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, December 1994, N= 1511 adults; May 1990, N= 3004 adults)

	Change in percent favoring increase 1990-1994	Increase	Keep Same	Decrease	DK
Combating crime 1994	NA	71%	23	4	2
Public schools 1994	-12	64%	28	6	2
1990		76%	20	3	1
Research on AIDS 1994	-4	55%	33	9	3
1990		59%	30	8	3
Programs for the homeless 1994	-14	53%	34	9	4
1990		67%	25	6	2
Health care 1994	-28	52%	33	11	4
1990		80%	16	3	1
Re-training programs for displaced workers 1994	NA	50%	36	10	4
Social Security 1994	-17	46%	45	7	2
1990		63%	32	3	2
Financial aid for college 1994	-10	41%	43	13	3
1990		51%	37	10	2
Environmental protection 1994	-31	40%	40	17	3
1990		71%	24	3	2
Scientific research 1994	-14	37%	44	15	4
1990		51%	37	9	3
Military defense 1994	+ 13	31%	44	23	2
1990		18%	39	40	3

- Surveys asking the public to prioritize issues facing the country consistently show the environment falling in the lower tier of priorities as the following table from a Times Mirror study illustrates. This study found that a third of Americans (34%) say that it is critical that the government do something to protect the environment, and another 46% say it is very important. On the other hand, over half say attending to the economic conditions in the country, reducing crime, and protecting U.S. jobs are critical.
- Also, in Times Mirror questions asking the public what they think is the most important problem facing the country today, only one to two percent have named the environment since 1990. Again, domestic issues such as crime, health care, and unemployment take precedence over the environment.

I'd like to read you some issues the country will be facing over the next few years. For each one please tell me if you personally feel it is a critical issue facing the country, a very important issue, or one that is somewhat important. If you don't have an opinion on some just say so. (Times Mirror Center for The People & The Press, May 1993, N= 1507 adults)

	Critical	Very Important	Somewhat Important	DK
Economic conditions in the country	53%	39	6	2
Reducing crime	53%	42	4	1
Protecting U.S. jobs	50%	44	5	1
Improving the quality of education in public schools	49%	44	6	1
Reducing the federal budget deficit	48%	39	10	3
Developing a health care plan for all Americans	44%	40	14	2
Protecting American family values	38%	43	16	3
Protecting the environment	34%	46	18	2
Dealing with the problem of the homeless 2		33%	44	21
The controversy over abortion	21%	28	40	11
The situation in Bosnia	16%	26	46	12
Dealing with the changing situation and supporting Democratic reforms in Russia	10%	31	47	12
Protecting the rights of				

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gays and lesbians	9%	18	56	17
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Most Important Environmental Problems: Air, Water and Toxins

Moving to which particular environmental issues concern the public the most, over the past few years, water and air pollution, toxins, and conserving natural resources have consistently topped the list. Less visible threats, such as global warming and the depletion of the ozone are of somewhat less concern to the public.

- A question asked by the Wirthlin Group in 1994 and again in 1995 shows a general rise in concern in all areas tested, and the top environmental concerns continue to be toxins, water and air pollution.
- Roper and Gallup studies from 1992 also illustrate that water and air pollution and toxins are more of a concern than other environmental issues, such as endangered species or global warming.

I am going to read you a list of environmental problems. For each problem, please tell me how high a priority you feel that problem is, using a scale from 1 to 10, where "1" means lowest priority and "10" means highest priority. Remember, you may choose any number between one and ten. How would you rate: (Wirthlin Group, August 1995, N= 1000 adults and August 1994, N= 1014 adults)

	1995	1994	
Toxic and hazardous waste disposal	8.9	8.3	
Water pollution	8.8	8.3	
Conserving natural resources	8.6	8.2	
Air pollution	8.6	8.0	
Garbage and landfills	8.0	7.5	
Littering		8.0	NA
Tropical rain forests	8.1	7.3	
Pesticides and herbicides	7.8	7.1	
Ozone depletion	7.8	6.9	
Finding alternative fuels for automobiles	7.5	7.5	
Endangered species	7.5	6.9	
Food additives and hormones	7.3	6.4	
Global warming	7.1	6.4	
Chlorine contamination	7.0	6.2	

As you know, there are many kinds of issues having to do with conservation and the environment, some more important than others. I am going to read you a list of some of these issues. How about... is that one of the most serious environmental problems we face, or fairly serious, or not that serious? (Roper Organization, conducted for Times Mirror, March 1992, N=1200 adults)

	Most Serious	Fairly Serious	Not That Serious	DK
Pollution of lakes, rivers, streams, and coastal waters	77%	19	3	1
Pollution from toxic waste sites	72%	23	3	2
Shortages of good drinking water	68%	21	8	2
Air pollution or smog	64%	28	7	1
Damage to the ozone layer in the atmosphere	62%	24	8	5
Not enough landfill space for garbage and trash	58%	32	8	2
A loss of open areas, woods, and natural places	46%	39	13	2
Global warming, also known as the greenhouse effect	45%	29	14	12
The extinction of some plants, animals, and insects	45%	34	17	3
A loss of wetland areas	42%	35	14	9

Here is a list of environmental issues that may be affecting the world as a whole. As I read each one, please tell me how serious a problem you personally believe it to be in the world -- very serious, somewhat serious, not very serious, or not serious at all... (Gallup Organization: *The Health of the Planet Survey*, March 1992, N=1032 adults)

	Very Serious	Smwht Serious	Not Very Serious	Not At All	DK
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and oceans	71%	24	3	*	2
Air pollution and smog	60%	33	4	*	3
Loss of rain forests and jungles	63%	26	5	1	5
Loss of ozone in the earth's atmosphere	56%	29	5	1	9
Soil erosion, polluted land, and loss of farmland	54%	34	7	1	4
Loss of animal and plant species	49%	36	10	2	3
Global warming or the 'greenhouse effect'	47%	31	7	3	12

The Role of Government in Protecting the Environment

Support for the federal government protecting the environment and for federal regulations continues to be strong among the public.

- A large majority (85%) agrees with the statement that the federal government has the responsibility of ensuring that most Americans have a clean environment. (E.D.K. January 1993)
- Americans believe government should set the standards when it comes to environmental protection. They have little confidence that individuals and industry will take adequate measures to protect the environment on their own. Over three-quarters (77%) agree that government regulation make the environment a much cleaner and safer place than it would be if businesses were left to their own devices. (Hart and Teeter March 1995)

And, close to eight in 10 favor laws requiring business to protect the environment, while close to six in 10 favor laws mandating individuals protect the environment. (NORC April 1994)

And which one of the following would be closest to your views? Government should let businesses decide for themselves how to protect the environment, even if it means they don't always do the right thing, or government should pass laws to make businesses protect the environment, even if it interferes with business' right to make their own decisions. (National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey, May 1994, N= 1386 adults; April 1993, N= 1557 adults)

	1994	1993
Should let businesses decide	9%	8%
Should pass laws	78	81
Can't choose	13	12

If you had to choose, which one of the following would be closest to your views? Government should let ordinary people decide for themselves how to protect the environment, even if it means they don't always do the right thing, or government should pass laws to make ordinary people protect the environment, even if it interferes with people's right to make their own decisions. (National Opinion Research Center, General Social Survey, May 1994, N= 1386 adults; April 1993, N= 1557 adults)

	1994	1993
Should let people decide	21%	17%
Should pass laws	58	64
Can't choose	21	19

- The public does not think that current laws to protect the environment are adequate. In a May 1995 ABC news poll, seven in 10 Americans (70%) agree that the federal government has not gone far enough to protect the environment. (ABC News May 1995)

In addition, 53% of the public thinks the federal government should strengthen environmental regulations, 26% say keep current regulations, and only 19% call for a reduction in regulations. (Hart and Teeter July 1995)

The public's opinion about environmental regulations falling short has remained fairly consistent over the past few years as illustrated by the following Times Mirror and Harris studies.

Thinking now about some specific areas, at the present time, do you think laws and regulations for... have gone too far, not far enough, or have struck about the right balance? (Roper Organization, conducted for Times Mirror, March 1992, N= 1200 adults)

	Gone Too Far	Not Far Enough	Struck Balance	DK
Fighting air pollution	5%	72	18	5
Fighting water pollution	3%	79	13	6
Protecting wetlands areas	8%	53	24	16
Protecting endangered species of plants, animals, and insects	11%	51	31	7

Do you think that the laws and regulations designed to...are currently too strict, about right, or not strict enough? (Louis Harris and Associates, August 1995, N=1005 adults)

	Too Strict	Not Strict Enough	About Right	Not Sure
Control the dumping and disposal of toxic chemicals	2%	80	16	1
Regulate the chemicals which can be discharged into the air, water, or ground by industry	5%	76	19	1
Control water pollution	4%	72	22	1
Control air and water quality	7%	64	27	2
Protect wetlands	15%	52	28	5

Current Surveys

Below are some highlights of surveys conducted recently which focus on specific environmental issues, such as particular current legislation and policy (and have not been cited in the previous pages).

Overall, the recent surveys illustrate that support for environmental protection is strong, and that large majorities of Americans oppose the Republicans' plans to weaken environmental regulations.

- A number of the news media polls have asked Americans their opinions of congressional Republicans' plans for environmental protection. In an April 1995 Gallup poll for CNN, close to half of Americans (49%) said the proposals by Republicans concerning the environment will not provide adequate protection for the environment while 30% said they will and 20% were unable to answer. A *Los Angeles Times* poll conducted in September found a plurality (47%) which believes that Republican proposals to curtail environmental regulations are a "bad thing." Thirty-eight percent said the proposals are a "good thing," and 12% were unable to answer.
- An August Harris poll found six in 10 voters (60%) oppose Republican legislation which would reduce the powers of the Environmental Protection Agency to control and regulate what companies must do to comply with environmental laws, and in a November poll 56% said the EPA is needed more today than it was when it was founded.
- Yankelovich Partners conducted a survey for *Time* and CNN in September focusing on some current environmental legislation, and found strong opposition to lessening current legislation.

Two-thirds (67%) oppose opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil and gas exploration, with 20% favoring exploration.

Over six in 10 Americans (63%) oppose reducing protection for endangered species, and 29% favor reduction.

Six in 10 adults (59%) oppose legislation to expand logging, mining, and ranching on public lands with a quarter (26%) favoring the expansion.

- A Research/Strategy/Management poll for the Sierra Club (May 1995), focused on the Clean Water Act, found that Americans are split on how safe American rivers, streams, lakes, oceans and bays are for fishing and swimming. Four in ten feel that these waters are safer since the Clean Water Act was passed, while the same number feel they are less safe.

This poll reveals that few Americans support easing restrictions and regulations in the Act. Nearly half (46%) support strengthening the Act, seven percent favor easing restrictions, and 18% favor leaving the Act as is.

Recently the House of Representatives passed a revision of the Clean Water Act and sent it to the Senate for their attention. Do you personally favor Congress revising the Clean Water Act that protects and safeguards the nation's open waters, to ease restrictions and regulations, to strengthen restrictions and regulations, or should they pretty much leave restrictions and regulations as they are now, or don't you know enough to say one way or another?

Ease restrictions and regulations	7%
Strengthen restrictions and regulations	46
Leave restrictions and regulations as they are	18
Don't know	29

- A survey conducted by Lake Research (October 1995) for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge for the Wilderness Society focused on the Arctic Refuge and found that almost six in 10 (58%) people oppose drilling for oil in the Refuge, and 21% favor drilling.
- A Lake Research/Tarrance Group poll examined voter preference for candidates given their positions on various issues. Sixty-seven percent say they would be less likely to support a candidate who voted to relax air and water standards. This vote against rises to 86% when it is asserted that the candidate took campaign contributions from the industries that wanted the standards relaxed.

About Belden & Russonello

Belden & Russonello, based in Washington, D.C. is a public opinion research firm, which has executed hundreds of survey, focus groups and communications programs throughout the United States, Canada, and Latin America. Our diverse clients include the major news media, many non-profit organizations and foundations, educational institutions, corporations, and Democratic political campaigns. Recent clients have included: the Collaborative Group on Biological Diversity, the Pew Charitable Trusts Global Stewardship Initiative, the ACLU, the National Wildlife Federation, the U.S. Census Bureau, Planned Parenthood of Pennsylvania, and the Education Commission of the States, to name a few.

Belden & Russonello's services range from large random-sample surveys, polls of elite and hard-to-reach populations, and focus groups, to political strategy and communications management. B&R is a bilingual firm, conducting surveys and focus groups in both Spanish and English.

Belden & Russonello was founded in 1982 by Nancy Belden, who has over 20 years of experience in research and communications, and training in research methods that began at Belden Associates, one the pioneer public opinion research firms. John Russonello joined the firm in 1988, bringing the perspective of a seasoned end-user of research in politics and communications to his work in research analysis. Senior analyst Kate Stewart oversees data analysis and overall management of survey and focus group research. Jaki Stanley, a Phd. in cognitive psychology and a statistical methods specialist, provides thorough statistical analysis for quantitative studies. Joe Belden, retired founder of Belden Associates, acts as a consultant with 50 years of highly successful experience developing questionnaire design, sample planning, and research analysis.