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The 1998 National Report Card on Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors

The Seventh Annual Survey of Adult Americans

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.

The *1998 NEETF/Roper Survey* is a continuation of seven straight years of data gathering about environmental knowledge, attitudes, behavior among adult Americans. *The 1998 National Report Card: Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors (NEETF/Roper Survey)* evaluates public attitudes as they exist today as well as changes over the past seven years. This report is based on a nationally representative sample of 2,000 Americans, age 18 and older, surveyed by Roper Starch Worldwide on May 1998.

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.

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 encountered 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 percentage of those who identify the correct answers.

The 1998 NEETF/Roper Survey looks 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. Some specific questions related to environmental myths and responses are:

- ***How most electricity in the United States is generated***

Just 27% of Americans know that most of our electricity is produced by burning coal and other flammable material. 55% think that most of our energy comes from non-air-polluting sources such as hydro, nuclear, solar power and dams are seen as our leading method of electricity production.

- ***Pollution of Rivers and Streams***

Only one in five (22%) know 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.

- ***Recycling of Paper***

The concept of recycling for tree-saving prevails on a 63% basis over the reduction of waste headed for landfills (24%) indicating that public does not recognize the goal of reducing waste going to landfills as a significant benefit of recycling programs.

- ***Wildlife Entanglement***

56% of Americans say the plastic beverage six-pack rings are the main cause of fish and wildlife entanglement. However, the main cause of such entanglement, according to the Center of Marine Conservation is abandoned fishing line left by anglers - a fact known by only 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. Only half know that the rods are stored temporarily on plant site pending long term solutions and 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 microorganisms in water supplies are the leading cause of childhood death worldwide. The majority of Americans (55%), influenced by public reports of famine and starvation believe it is lack of food that causes childhood death.

- **Main Source of Oil in Rivers, Lakes and Bays**

16% Americans know 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)**

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 (23%) of Americans know that paper is the greatest source of landfill material, while 29% think that the disposable diaper is the greatest threat to our landfills.

- **Definition of a Watershed**

About two out of five Americans (40%) 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 definition.

Outcomes

As seen in the 1996 and 1997 NEETF/Roper studies, a relationship exists between environmental concerns, knowledge and behaviors. A schematic of this relationship would look like something like this:

Concern → Education

Environment

Americans' deep concern for the environment is reflected in the plurality of those surveyed who think current environmental regulations do not go far enough and the majority who think the next ten years are the last decade to save the planet from environmental catastrophe. The survey also shows that Americans tend to believe environmental myths rather than truths. Furthermore, even those who say they have "a lot" or "a

fair amount" of environmental knowledge believe inaccurate information.

Still, as the data show, there is often a relationship between knowledge and behavior. For nine of the eleven activities that benefit the environment, the likelihood that people perform those activities frequently increases proportionately with their self-reported environmental knowledge. The only exceptions are the turning off of lights and appliances (which nearly everyone does) and the use of alternative form of transportation (which may depend more on regional infrastructure and availability than concern about the environment).

Conclusion

Overall, America's report card on environmental knowledge is not good. Designed in part to highlight some of the myths surrounding environmental issues and problems, the 1998 NEETF /Roper Survey demonstrates the power of myth in the context of the environment. What may be especially alarming is the widespread and persistent nature of the mis information among most demographic subgroups. Clearly, there is a need to provide environmental information in a form that the American Public can more easily remember and internalize. Once the public understands what it is hearing and knows why it is important, environmental myths will begin to disappear. The responsibility of moving in the direction of greater information and understanding rests with public agencies, non-governmental organizations, the environmental community and the media.

Source: Based on the information contained in *The National Report Card on Environmental Knowledge, Attitudes and Behaviors*. The National Environmental Education & Training Foundation and Roper Starch Worldwide *Turning Data into Intelligence Worldwide*. December 1998: Washington, D. C.

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