

Research Matters

Who Cares about the Environment - 2015

1. Background

Who Cares about the Environment 2015 is the latest in the NSW Government's social research series that has been run every three years since it commenced in 1994. It measures environmental knowledge, attitudes and behaviours in the NSW population, and provides an indication of how these have changed over time. Quantitative data was collected by a landline and mobile telephone survey of 2000 people in New South Wales, aged over 15 years. Qualitative data was collected from eight focus groups in Sydney and regional New South Wales Data in late 2015.

2. Key matters raised in research - a summary

The following provides a simple snapshot of the research results:

- Approximately one in 10 people cited environmental issues in their top two priorities for the NSW Government's attention now (9% of respondents) and in 10 years' time (11%).
- The majority of people said they are concerned, to some extent, about environmental problems (73% in total, of which 27% are concerned a great deal, 38% a fair amount and 8% a little).
- For the respondents who said they are not at all concerned about environmental problems (26%), the most common reasons given for their lack of concern were 'the environment is in good condition' and 'it is a low priority compared with other issues'.
- Almost two-thirds of people (62%) rated the condition of the natural environment in New South Wales as good or very good. 12% rated it as poor or very poor and 23% rated it neither good nor bad.
- The majority of people in NSW were satisfied with their local environment in terms of their access to green space (87%), air quality (81%), the cleanliness of beaches and oceans (78%), the management of litter (70%) and the water quality in rivers and lakes (68%). Satisfaction levels did vary significantly by region for most issues with no region recording significantly lower satisfaction levels across all five issues.
- Awareness of the term 'biodiversity' was widespread, but understanding of it was relatively low; 83% had heard of the term, but only 30% could demonstrate an understanding. Almost half of all respondents (47%) thought that the balance between protecting natural habitats for native plant and animal species in New South Wales and using the land for other purposes was about right, while 42% thought there was not enough emphasis on protecting native plants and animals in New South Wales
- The importance of having national parks in New South Wales was almost universally recognised by both park users and non-users (99%)
- Perceptions of climate change impacts and risk were explored in the survey. The most commonly held view was that there have been more severe storms and floods (61%), severe bushfires (56%), air pollution (54%) and heatwaves (51%) in the past 10 years in New South Wales. Around a quarter of respondents said there had been no change in these events. For those who perceived a change in these events, the majority of people attributed it to climate change to some extent (67–85%), with the link perceived to be strongest for heatwaves and severe storms and floods.
- People across New South Wales are engaged in a wide range of actions which benefit the environment. Almost everyone reported doing at least one of the eight everyday actions in the survey. The most widely adopted activities, reported to be done always or mostly by around three-quarters of respondents, were trying to limit energy use (80%), planning meals to limit the amount of food thrown out (77%), and separating electronic items from general

waste and recycling (72%). Pet owners, kept their pets away from native wildlife (83% of pet owners). Activities with the lowest uptake reported by respondents were use of own bags to carry shopping and eating organically grown food (25% and 36% respectively reported never or rarely doing these). Two-thirds of people (67%) reported doing one or more voluntary activities in the last year that benefit the environment.

3. Who is it useful for?

Who Cares about the Environment 2015 is especially useful for Local Government staff and elected officials; officers employed in Regional Branches of Government Agencies; Regional Not for Profit organisations and other community organisations; University staff and Vocational Education teachers.

4. Where can you find it?

You can find the report and the cross-tabulated data here:

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/communities/who-cares.htm>

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Appendix - More Detailed Findings Provided by OEH

1. COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

Results for 1.1–1.3 are from unprompted questions, where verbatim responses have been coded thematically into the categories reported.

1.1 Views on the two most important issues for the NSW Government at present

- Approximately one in ten people cited environmental issues among their top two priorities for the NSW Government at present (9%). The environmental issues cited were coal seam gas, 'the environment', renewable energy, climate change, and water. Issues related to transport (33%, of which 22% related to roads and traffic, and 11% related to public transport and railways), health (26%), education (17%) and unemployment (11%) were all more commonly cited than environmental issues.
- The proportion of people citing environmental issues has increased from 6% in 2012 to 9% in 2015; this is within the historic range of the Who Cares survey (low of 6% in 2012, and peak of 17% in 2006 during the Millennium Drought). Transport, health and education have consistently been among the three most prevalent issues nominated since the 2000 Who Cares survey.

1.2 Views on the two most important issues for the NSW Government in 10 years' time

- Approximately one in 10 people cited environmental issues among their top priorities for the NSW Government in 10 years' time (11%). Issues relating to transport (24%), health (21%), education (15%), social issues (14%), unemployment (12%), planning and development (12%), and cost of living/personal finances (12%) were more commonly cited than environmental issues.

- The proportion of people citing environmental issues as a future priority for the NSW Government has declined steadily over time, from a peak of 25% in 2006 during the Millennium Drought to a low of 11% in 2015.
- Over the life of the Who Cares survey, a higher proportion of people have consistently identified environmental issues as a future priority rather than a current priority, although the difference was minor in 2015 (11% future; 9% current priority).

1.3 Views on the two most important environmental issues in NSW today

- Views were wide-ranging, spanning the following issues: mining (19%), climate change (14%), biodiversity/forests (14%), energy (13%), air pollution (13%), water pollution (12%), waste (11%), water management/drought (9%), development and planning (7%), and other pollution (5%). Issues relating to 'energy resources, generation and associated impacts' were a dominant theme, with more than half of respondents nominating mining, climate change, energy or air pollution issues. Nearly one in five (19%) could not cite any environmental issues.
- There was significant regional variability in the prominence of issues.
- The 2015 results were similar to the 2012 survey, with a difference within a range (increase or decrease) of 3%. There has been greater disparity in the prominence of issues between previous Who Cares surveys, with water pollution the dominant theme in 1997 (nominated by 56%) and 2000 (42%) and water management/ supply/ drought the dominant theme in 2006 (58%) and 2009 (43%).

1.4 What the NSW Government should do for the environment over the next few years

- Views were wide-ranging. Energy and climate change initiatives were the most common suggestion, cited by 17% of respondents. Other common suggestions were government strategies (10%, this is a broad category comprising investment and use of science, monitoring, consultation, planning, and government performance), bushland/biodiversity initiatives (9%), and community education and engagement (7%). Nineteen per cent said they did not know what the government could do to protect and look after the environment over the next few years.
- The proportion citing energy and climate change initiatives has steadily increased over time from 4% in 2000 to a peak of 17% in 2015, with the exception of 2012 (8%).

2. CONCERN FOR ENVIRONMENT, AND REASON FOR CONCERN OR LACK OF CONCERN

- The majority of people said they are concerned to some degree about environmental problems (73% in total, of which 27% are concerned a great deal, 38% a fair amount and 8% a little). This sentiment has remained fairly stable since 2009; significantly higher levels of concern were expressed in 2006, which was when NSW was experiencing prolonged and widespread drought.
- For the majority of respondents, the main reason for concern was the impact on future generations (51%); fewer people cited the impact on nature (19%), the economy (5%), and personal impacts on their health (12%), their quality of life (9%) or their financial situation (3%) as their main reason for concern.
- For the respondents who said they are not at all concerned about environmental problems (26%), the most common reasons given for their lack of concern were 'the environment is in good condition' and 'it is a low priority compared with other issues'. This reasoning has increased since 2012, while 'the problem is not as bad as they say' type of reasoning has declined.

3. VIEWS ON CONDITION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

3.1 Rating of the condition of the natural environment in NSW The majority (62%) of respondents rated the condition of the natural environment in NSW as good/very good; 12% rated it as poor/very poor; 23% rated it as neither good nor bad.

3.2 Satisfaction with the local environment

- The majority of respondents said they are satisfied with their local environment, in terms of the following aspects: access to green space such as parks, forests and natural areas (87%); air quality (81%); cleanliness of beaches and oceans (78%); the management of litter (70%); and the water quality of rivers and lakes (68%). Highest levels of dissatisfaction were with the management of litter (26%) and water quality of rivers and lakes (28%).
- There was regional variability in satisfaction with these aspects of the local environment; no region recorded significantly lower satisfaction levels across all aspects surveyed. Satisfaction with air quality was lower among residents of the Hunter region and in the Sydney regions of Eastern/Inner West, Northern, Southwest and Western Sydney. Satisfaction with the management of litter was lower in the South West Sydney and Western Sydney regions.

4. VIEWS ON ENVIRONMENT REGULATIONS

4.1 General views

- While the majority of respondents support current environmental regulatory settings in NSW, a large minority do not. When asked about environmental regulations generally:
 - 90% agreed and 6% disagreed that 'environmental regulation should improve, rather than merely maintain, the health of the environment'
 - 30% agreed and 60% disagreed that 'a lower level of environmental regulation is required'
 - 35% agreed and 51% disagreed that 'environmental regulation is restricting the growth of the NSW economy'.

4.2 For industry sectors

- When asked about the environmental regulations for specific industry sectors, responses were variable:
 - support for a lower level of environmental regulation was higher when framed in general terms (30%) than when about specific industry sectors (6–22% said environmental regulation for the six industry sectors was too strict)
 - the most common view of the environmental regulations for manufacturing, forestry, and farming and agriculture was that they are about right, held by 40–42% of respondents. For property development and construction, mining in general, and the coal seam gas industry specifically, the most common view was that the environmental regulations are too lax, held by 42–55%. There was regional variability in the views on environmental regulation.

5. KNOWLEDGE AND VIEWS ABOUT BIODIVERSITY AND THREATENED SPECIES

- Awareness of the term 'biodiversity' was widespread, but understanding of what it means was relatively low; 83% of respondents had heard of the term, but only 30% could demonstrate an understanding (given a correct or partially correct explanation).
- After an explanation of biodiversity was offered, respondents were asked about their views on the role of nature and biodiversity. There was widespread agreement with the importance of

protecting nature and biodiversity for a broad range of reasons including for future generations, its role in providing food, clean air and water, medicines, and in tackling climate change, and for its personal recreational benefits.

- Almost half of all respondents (47%) thought that the balance between protecting natural habitats for native plant and animal species in NSW and using the land for other purposes was about right, while 42% thought there was not enough emphasis on protecting native plants and animals in NSW, and only 6% thought there was too much emphasis. These results differ slightly from the 2012 survey results, with an increase of 5% in 'about right' and a decline of 3% in both 'not enough' and 'too much' emphasis since 2012.
- There were moderate levels of awareness that there are threatened plant and animal species in NSW.
- There was a high level of concern about the possibility of species loss in NSW, among those who were aware that there are threatened plant and animal species in NSW.

6. VIEWS ON NATIONAL PARKS

- The importance of having national parks in NSW was almost universally recognised by both park users and non-users (99%), with the strength of agreement highest among more frequent park users.
- There was also widespread agreement that national parks in NSW are well maintained (83%), with the strength of agreement again associated with more frequent use of national parks.
- The regulations for national park visitors were viewed as being 'about right' by the majority of respondents (66%), while 15% said they are 'too strict', 11% said they are 'too lax' and 7% said they don't know.

7. VIEWS ON CLIMATE CHANGE IMPACTS AND RISKS

- Views about climate change impacts in NSW were explored in terms of perceived changes in the frequency of extreme weather and other events in the state over the past decade, and the extent to which this is attributed to climate change. The most commonly held view was that there have been more severe storms and floods (61%), severe bushfires (56%), air pollution (54%) and heatwaves (51%) in the past 10 years in NSW. Approximately one quarter of respondents said there had been no change in these events.
- For those who perceived a change in these events, the majority of people attributed it to climate change to some extent (67–85%), with the link perceived to be strongest for heatwaves and severe storms and floods.
- Of the events surveyed, respondents were most concerned about the direct impact of air pollution (54% reporting a 'fair amount' or 'great deal' of concern), severe bushfires (53%) and severe storms and floods (51%) on themselves and their family in the foreseeable future.
- The majority of respondents (84%) said they think climate change is happening or is going to happen, be it due to human activities or natural cycles, while 9% said they think it is not, and 7% said they don't know.

8. PERSONAL BEHAVIOURS

- People across NSW are engaged in a wide range of actions which benefit the environment, both in and related to their homes, and in the community.
- Almost everyone reported doing at least one of the eight everyday actions in the survey. The most widely adopted activities, reported to be done always or mostly by around three quarters of respondents, were trying to limit energy use (80%), planning meals to limit the amount of

food thrown out (77%), and separating electronic items from general waste and recycling (72%). Among pet owners, the majority reported keeping their pets away from native wildlife (83% of pet owners saying they 'always' or 'mostly' do this). Activities with the lowest uptake reported by respondents were use of own bags to carry shopping and eating organically grown food (25% and 36% respectively reported never or rarely doing these).

- Two-thirds of people (67%) reported doing one or more voluntary activities in the last year that benefit the environment. Most were done in the respondent's local area (81% of those volunteering, or 57% of all respondents) and were done independently of an organised group (61%). Cleaning up litter in a public space, park or forest was the most widespread activity (58%). The less common activities were rescuing wildlife (28%), taking part in a Landcare or Bushcare project, tree planting or other environmental restoration projects (14%), community gardening or composting (14%) and citizen-science type projects (11%), while 18% reported doing voluntary activities other than those listed in the survey.