

Environmentalism is not about being rich or poor

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Higher and lower incomes make little difference to people's concern about the natural environment, according to new research from the University of Bristol. A paper published today in the *European Sociological Review* shows that, rather than having more important things to worry about, poor people and poor countries prioritise protecting the environment as much as do richer people and richer countries.

Dr Malcolm Fairbrother of Bristol's School of Geographical Sciences compared surveys from 78 nations in conducting the most comprehensive analysis yet of the relationship between income and environmental attitudes.

Previous research has argued that richer people are greener, but has been

based on data from a smaller number of [countries](#). Dr Fairbrother analysed data collected over more than a decade by the World Values Survey programme, which started measuring [public opinion](#) about the environment in the late 1980s.

Respondents were asked a series of questions about their willingness to pay money to prevent pollution, and about how serious they perceived different kinds of problems to be in their communities. People in poorer countries were much more concerned about local water and air quality, for example, while differences with respect to global issues like [biodiversity](#) and [climate change](#) were small.

Dr Fairbrother said: "The analysis looked at differences not just across countries at a given time, but also patterns in how environmental concern has changed as national economies have developed. Sometimes people talk about environmentalism like it's a kind of luxury good, which you can only really afford once you have enough income. But it turns out that's not true: as countries get richer, they don't get any more green than before. Even in quite [poor countries](#), most people say the environment is important to them.

"And actually, there are good reasons why poor people and developing countries are so concerned about pollution. A lot of [environmental problems](#) have big implications for poorer people. Think about the pollutants in the air around power plants and incinerators, for example, or about how climate change is leading to higher sea levels off the coast of Bangladesh.

"We all suffer the costs of other people's pollution, but the poor probably get the worst deal in terms of costs relative to benefits. So if many of them believe that environmental conditions aren't so good in their communities, and they like the idea of introducing charges for pollution, it's not a mystery why."

The study also found that within countries at a given level of development, people earning higher incomes said they were more willing to pay more to protect the environment—but only slightly, and on other questions there was no significant difference. People's environmental attitudes were less tied to [income](#) than to their basic values with respect to financial security, stability, freedom and self-expression.

'Rich People, Poor People, and Environmental Concern: Evidence across Nations and Time' by Malcolm Fairbrother in the *European Sociological Review*.

More information: [esr.oxfordjournals.org/content ...
012/07/27/esr.jcs068](https://esr.oxfordjournals.org/content/012/07/27/esr.jcs068)

Provided by University of Bristol

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