

Global surveys show environmental concerns rank low among public concerns

February 25 2013

A newly released international study reveals that the issue of climate change is not a priority for people in the United States and around the world.

The surveys showed that when asked to rank priority worries, people were five times more likely to point to the economy over the environment. Additionally, when asked about climate change, people identified the issue as more of a national problem than a personal concern.

Coordinated surveys, conducted by the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) in 33 countries from 1993 through 2010, "are the first and only surveys that put long-term attitudes toward environmental issues in general and global climate change in particular in an international perspective," said Tom W. Smith, Director of the [General Social Survey](#), a project of the independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, and author of a paper that summarizes the surveys.

In the surveys, [respondents](#) were asked the relative importance of eight issues: health care, education, crime, the environment, immigration, the economy, terrorism and poverty.

The economy ranked highest in concern in 15 countries, followed by health care in eight, education in six, poverty in two, and terrorism and crime in one country each. Immigration and the environment did not

make the top of the list in any country over the 17-year period; in the United States, the economy ranked as the highest concern, while concern for the environment ranked sixth.

In terms of national averages, the order of concern was the economy (25 percent); health care (22.2) education (15.6); poverty (11.6); crime (8.6) environment (4.7), immigration (4.1) and terrorism (2.6), the surveys showed. Terrorism's low ranking was notable in light of the widespread attention the issue has received since 2001, though it topped the list of concerns in Turkey.

The paper, "[Public Attitudes](#) towards Climate Change and Other Global Environmental Issues across Time and Countries, 1993-2010," was presented recently at the "Policy Workshop: Public Attitudes and Environmental Policy in Canada and Europe, Canada-European Transatlantic Dialogue," at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada.

NORC is issuing the survey summary on behalf of the ISSP, a consortium of survey research organizations in 49 countries. The ISSP coordinates studies on topics worldwide and uses the same scientific standards to make the findings representative of the nations' populations.

A focus on the environment

In the United States, only 3.6 percent of the people surveyed selected the environment as the nation's most pressing issue, as opposed to 15 percent of the people in Norway, which had the highest level of environmental concern.

The surveys also asked questions about [worries](#) concerning particular kinds of environmental problems, including [global climate change](#). One asked which problem among nine was most important for their country as a whole as opposed to the individual.

Air pollution ranked first in 13 countries, followed by climate change, which was the top concern in 10 countries. In another question, the surveys asked people which environmental problem they considered most personally dangerous and found that in only three countries was climate change listed as the most dangerous environmental problem, trailing nuclear power plants and industrial air pollution.

"One reason for the relatively low ranking of climate change is that people often believed it did not directly affect them. Climate change is seen more as a country-level problem than as a personal problem," Smith said. "While 14.6 percent cited it as the most important environmental issue for their country, only 9 percent rated it first for themselves."

The latest surveys were completed in 2010. Similar surveys have been conducted since 1993, and little change has been noted on people's concern for climate change. Differences exist among the countries, however, suggesting that widespread public support for current action on the issue will represent a major shift in attitude.

The surveys indicate some expectation for greater future concern about climate change. "The greater mentioning of climate change as a problem by those under 30 versus those 70 and older probably reflects generational effects and if so, should tend to increase levels of concern in the future," Smith said.

Environmental issues are of greatest concern in Scandinavian nations, Switzerland and Canada. They were followed by France, Austria, Finland, the former West Germany, Taiwan, Korea, and New Zealand. Toward the bottom of the list are Croatia, Latvia, Chile, Turkey, Lithuania and Argentina.

[Climate change](#) was listed as the top environmental concern in Japan, West Germany, Canada, Britain and Scandinavia, where between 19 and

26 percent of the population indicated it was their top environmental issue.

Provided by University of Chicago

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