

# 'Environmentalism' in Britain today – who are the environmentalists?

Since the apocalyptic days of the early 1970s, when there were thought to be significant limits to growth, the environmental movement has evolved into a somewhat more passive and political entity, with lounge suits and briefcases more the order of the day than sandals and placards.

The emergence of sustainable development has largely been considered a genuine attempt to reconcile some of the divisions that surfaced between economic progress and environmental protection. This new world order of sustainability, emphasised consistently in government publications,<sup>1</sup> has encompassed a re-emphasis of environmental action that has placed individual citizens at the centre of the move towards sustainability, with the mantra 'think global, act local'.

This radical shift was meant to herald an era of inclusive environmentalism, with the traditional stereotypes relating to eccentric conservationists and naturists being replaced with new forms of sustainable living for all. So after ten years of sustainable development, are we all environmentalists now?

This new form of grass-roots environmentalism, which has sought to engage citizens in different forms of behaviour, has led to a range of government initiatives to increase individual environmental action, such as the 'Are You Doing Your Bit?' campaign.<sup>2</sup>

Along with other initiatives, this campaign seeks to encourage small changes in behaviour and lifestyle that can make a significant difference to the global environment – including energy saving in the home, water conservation, sustainable waste management (such as recycling and waste reduction), and green consumerism. Specifically, these activities might range from buying energy-saving light bulbs, water butts, and composters, to switching off lights in unused rooms, turning down the thermostat, and waiting until there is a full load before putting on the washing machine.

In the first of a short series of articles on how far the 'new environmentalism' has impacted on householder behaviour, **Stewart Barr, Andrew Gilg, and Nicholas Ford** report the results of survey research on the demographic make-up of environmentalists and the actions they are taking

This new environmentalism thus includes everyone, because it focuses on everyday lives and lifestyles.

The major difficulty that faces policy-makers promoting these new forms of environmental action is not convincing people that they should become involved – opinion polls consistently report support for environmental initiatives in the home<sup>3</sup> – but rather the question of how to actually effect action itself. This so-called value-action gap is what lies at the heart of much soul-searching among policy-makers in Whitehall departments. Actually transforming warm words into action has become a major priority for government policy-makers concerned that aspirations are not meeting reality. The question therefore emerges as to how the gap between attitudes and action can be bridged.

This question lay at the heart of research recently undertaken by the authors which examined environmental action in and around the home.<sup>4</sup> A questionnaire survey of 1,600 households in Devon was undertaken in the summer of 2002, posing questions concerning peoples' participation in 40 environmental actions, as well as their attitudes towards undertaking these behaviours. There were also questions regarding social make-up, environmental values and attitudes, and the possible reasons for and against participating in environmental action. Within the 1,265 questionnaires returned, a fascinating snapshot of contemporary environmental action was revealed, providing a wealth of data on the nature of the modern environmentalist and, more significantly, of the non-environmentalist.

This article, the first in a series of three on modern environmentalism, reports on

who the environmentalists are and what they are doing.

## The state of environmentalism

The data from the questionnaire showed that there was considerable variation in the levels of individual behaviour reported by the sample. For the different types of behaviour measured, the ranges of activities can be seen below:

### ■ Water saving (per cent always/usually):

- 89 per cent turned off the tap when washing dishes;
- 72 per cent used a shower/filled the bath half full;
- 33 per cent turned the shower off when 'soaping up'; and
- 18 per cent took fewer showers/baths.

### ■ Energy saving (per cent always/usually):

- 93 per cent switched off lights in unoccupied rooms;
- 86 per cent waited for a full washing load;
- 47 per cent reduced their hot-water temperature; and
- 31 per cent bought energy-efficient light bulbs.

### ■ Waste management (per cent always/usually):

- 78 per cent recycled newspaper;
- 52 per cent recycled glass;
- 25 per cent composted their kitchen waste; and
- 33 per cent composted their garden waste.

### ■ Green consumerism (per cent always/usually):

- 36 per cent bought local produce;
- 34 per cent purchased products with less harmful detergents;
- 28 per cent looked for items with less packaging;



- 26 per cent bought recycled toilet tissue;
- 13 per cent bought organic produce; and
- 11 per cent bought Fair Trade produce.

These significant variations demonstrate the divisions both within and between types of behaviour. For example, recycling of newspaper was undertaken frequently by a large number of people, whereas only a quarter of the sample regularly composted kitchen waste.

This raises significant concerns for policy-makers over a range of issues. For instance, in the context of municipal waste management, the fact that only 25 per cent of the sample were regularly composting kitchen waste raises serious concerns over the overall government target of reducing waste to 35 per cent of 1995 levels, given the amount of biodegradable waste being sent to landfill.

And, on another front, efforts to support organic producers appear to be severely in doubt given that only 13 per cent of the sample reported purchasing such produce regularly.

Nonetheless, policy-makers should take comfort from the high levels of paper and glass recycling, along with the more habitual activities of saving water and energy in the home, which was undertaken by large proportions of the sample. However, despite these positive trends, the overall comment on the data must be that the situation is at best disparate.

### Who are the environmentalists?

However, these broad trends mask even bigger divisions that were manifested between individual groups of people. Analysis of the data revealed that there were four different types of individual with distinctive behavioural characteristics. These ranged from 'committed environmentalists' through to 'non-environmentalists' (with two further groups in the middle – 'mainstream' and 'occasional' environmentalists). The two extreme groups had sharp differences in the level of behaviour reported, summarised in the table below.

Committed environmentalists were highly likely to engage in almost all activities, with the lowest scores being for behaviours such as taking fewer baths and showers. Although the non-environmentalist group was small, their commitment was slight, with only 4 per cent composting kitchen waste, compared with nearly four-fifths of the committed group. Fewer than two-fifths of respondents recycled newspaper, compared with almost the entire committed group. The differences are both stark and worrying.

So who are the environmentalists, and how do they differ from the other groups? An analysis of the demographic data from the questionnaire revealed that the committed environmentalist was:

- significantly older;
- a home owner;
- lived in terraced or semi-detached properties;
- more likely to vote Green or Liberal Democrat; and

■ significantly more likely to be part of a community organisation.

Conversely, non-environmentalists were more likely to be:

- significantly younger;
- male;
- from larger families;
- more likely to rent from a local authority;
- in the lowest-income earning group;
- non-voters or Labour supporters; and
- apathetic to community group membership.

While acknowledging that there are obviously exceptions to these generalisations, the results provide a fascinating insight into the characteristics of those enacting environmental practices in the early 21st century. The findings suggest that those more heavily engaged in environmental action tend to be from maturing middle class groups, who are involved within the community and are politically active. The individuals most apathetic towards the environment comprise a contrasting group, with younger, low-income earning, and politically passive individuals who do not have any institutional links within the community.

These results suggest that work by authors such as Paul Selman<sup>5</sup> on local sustainability is correct in suggesting that a major barrier to environmental citizenship and sustainable lifestyles is the extent to which individuals are involved in their local community and feel that they have a stake in the political process governing environmental and social issues. The demographic information concerning age and gender also provides useful insights into the modern environmentalist, who appears to be mature in years and includes equal proportions of men and women.

Thus, if the modern environmentalist is this mature individual, interested and involved in local issues, what other personal characteristics define him or her from the rest of the population? The next article in the series will describe some of the data relating to peoples' outlook on society and the environment, while the final piece will examine what motivates the environmentalist to participate in environmental action. ■

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### Differences in environmental behaviour

Committed environmentalists (294), per cent always/usually		Non-environmentalists (43), per cent always/usually	
<b>Water saving, per cent always/usually</b>			
98	Turned off the tap when washing dishes	70	
96	Used a shower/filled the bath half full	41	
58	Turned the shower off when 'soaping up'	32	
53	Took fewer showers/baths	37	
<b>Energy saving, per cent always/usually</b>			
100	Switched off lights in unoccupied rooms	83	
99	Waited for a full washing load	78	
89	Reduced their hot-water temperature	17	
68	Bought energy-efficient light bulbs	32	
<b>Waste management, per cent always/usually</b>			
93	Recycled newspaper	59	
88	Recycled glass	38	
78	Composted their kitchen waste	4	
83	Composted their garden waste	17	
<b>Green consumerism, per cent always/usually</b>			
91	Bought local produce	68	
81	Purchased products with less harmful detergents	16	
83	Looked for items with less packaging	17	
71	Bought recycled toilet tissue	30	
65	Bought organic produce	18	
64	Bought Fair Trade produce	18	

### Notes

1 *Annual Report. Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, London, 2002*

2 'Are You Doing Your Bit?' See <http://www.doingyourbit.org.uk>

3 *Social Trends. Office for National Statistics. The Stationary Office, London, 2002*

4 *Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number R000239417*

5 *P. Selman: Local Sustainability. Chapman, London, 1996*