

'Environmentalism' in Britain today – attitudes towards environmentalism

In the last of a short series of articles on how far the 'new environmentalism' has impacted on householder behaviour, **Stewart Barr**, **Andrew Gilg**, and **Nicholas Ford** examine individual attitudes towards helping the environment and look at where policy-makers may be able to change people's attitudes towards environmental action



'Building the sustainable society may rest on shifting people's attitudes about helping the environment'

In our previous two articles on environmentalism in Britain today,¹ we examined the nature and structure of the new environmentalism, which is focused around household activities to help the environment. Using a large study of environmental behaviours in Devon, four clusters of individuals have been identified according to their relative commitment to environmental action in the home, with the sharpest contrast being

between the first and fourth groups (committed and non-environmentalists). We showed how these two distinct behavioural groups of individuals – one undertaking numerous environmental actions regularly and the other hardly at all – varied demographically and differed according to their social and environmental values.

However, while of interest from an academic viewpoint, from the perspective

of policy there is usually little that can be done to alter someone's fundamental values. Nonetheless, social scientists generally agree that a person's attitudes towards environmental issues are generally more malleable. Throughout society attitudinal changes have resulted in consequential behavioural responses on such issues as drink-driving or smoking, through a range of exhortation and regulatory measures. If attitudes can be

Attitudes to helping the environment

Committed environmentalists (294), per cent agree / strongly agree		Non-environmentalists (43), per cent agree / strongly agree	
Environmental concern and threat			
4	I've never been concerned with environmental issues	30	
63	I am very concerned about environmental issues	37	
78	Environmental problems caused by over-use of resources are a threat to me and my family	53	
14	My personal welfare isn't affected by environmental problems	29	
Convenience and ease in helping the environment			
9	It's too complicated and inconvenient to act in ways which help the environment	36	
62	I find helping the environment is easy	16	
3	I don't have time to worry about the environment	24	
57	I have ample room to store recyclables	22	
77	I find helping the environment is convenient	23	
Effectiveness of helping the environment			
92	Each person's behaviour can have a positive effect on society and the environment	66	
4	Since one person cannot have any effect upon natural resource problems, it doesn't make any difference what I do	16	
Influence other people have			
74	When I see other people around me helping the environment, I feel I should do as well	31	
39	The more other people help the environment, the more I will	30	
Satisfaction of helping the environment			
62	It makes me feel good when I do something to help the environment, such as re-using or recycling things	47	
What people think of environmentalists			
67	I think of myself as an environmentalist	22	
4	People who help the environment are a bit eccentric	27	

altered in the medium to long term, then building the sustainable society may rest on shifting people's attitudes about helping the environment, be that through recycling a drinks can or buying an energy-saving light bulb.

This final article in our series examines individual attitudes towards helping the environment and looks at where policy-makers may be able to change people's attitudes towards environmental action.

Attitudes and environmentalism

The research reported in this article was based on a large Economic and Social Research Council² project on environmental action in and around the home. The research comprised a large questionnaire survey of 1,600 households in Devon concerning personal environmentalism, with 1,265 completed surveys returned. Individuals were asked a range of questions relating to their attitudes and behaviour towards helping the environment. The questions relating to environmental attitudes ranged over a large number of issues highlighted by previous research

relating to waste management,³ energy saving, water use, and green consumption.⁴ Issues of particular interest related to:

- environmental concern and the threat posed by environmental issues;
- convenience and ease in helping the environment;
- a belief that helping the environment would be effective;
- whether other people's behaviour influenced personal action;
- whether people felt satisfied when helping the environment; and
- what people thought of environmentalists.

How people view environmental action

The table above shows how many people agreed or disagreed with the different statements relating to environmental attitudes, in relation to those most committed to environmental action and individuals who undertook very few environmental behaviours (non-environmentalists). The results are

revealing and demonstrate a clear divergence in attitudes according to behavioural commitment.

In terms of environmental concern, almost two-thirds of committed environmentalists stated that they were very concerned about the state of the environment, with little more than a third of non-environmentalists agreeing with this. Indeed, just 4 per cent of the committed group stated they had never been concerned about environmental issues, while almost a third of non-environmentalists said that they had never had concerns.

These findings reveal a fundamental divergence between a behaviourally committed group, who have a history of environmental concern, and an inactive cluster of individuals who on the whole have never been interested in or motivated by environmental issues.

These findings, while not entirely surprising, are of note given the strong media attention paid to environmental issues. However, while non-environmentalists were unwilling to state that they were concerned about environmental issues, they were much more likely to believe that environmental problems posed a direct threat to them and their family. Non-environmentalists therefore seemed less likely to accept they had significant concerns about environmental issues, but they nonetheless had internalised the potential threats that such issues posed to their own lives. Accordingly, almost four-fifths of committed environmentalists stated they felt threatened. The possible effects of environmental problems appear, therefore, to be more acutely perceived than does a tangible sense of real concern about environmental issues.

Divergence also occurs with respect to the data examining the convenience of helping the environment. Only just over a third of non-environmentalists agreed that it was too complicated to help the environment, yet only 16 per cent felt that helping the environment was 'easy'. There is a clear distinction between non-environmentalists in contrast to committed individuals which appears to show that while environmental action may not be complicated, this does not imply that it is 'easy' and straightforward.

The other items provide good evidence for this argument. While a minority in each group were worried about the time they had available to undertake environmental action, only 22 per cent of non-environmentalists stated that they had the room to store waste for recycling. Indeed, only 23 per cent of this group stated that they found helping the environment convenient. Accordingly, for those less involved in environmental action there is a tangible sense that, while helping the environment may be fairly simple, it is

► necessary to find doing so convenient personally.

In regard to the effectiveness of environmental action, somewhat unexpectedly there was a general perception among the non-environmentalists that personal actions could benefit the environment, although the percentage agreeing was considerably lower than for the committed group. It appears that most individuals do believe that they can make a difference, despite the conventional view that this is a barrier to action.

The social view of environmentalism provides for further interesting interpretation. Three-quarters of committed environmentalists felt they should help the environment if they saw others doing so, whereas less than a third of non-environmentalists agreed with this. However, when asked whether they would *actually* help the environment if others did so, only 39 per cent of committed environmentalists agreed. While others' behaviour may enlist feelings of guilt, it is not necessarily the case that individuals always act on this guilt complex.

Nonetheless, 67 per cent of committed environmentalists thought of themselves as environmentalists, whereas only 22 per cent of the uncommitted group did so. Is it the case, therefore, that while we may like to think of ourselves as environmentalists and feel guilty by not participating, we actually very often don't want to be seen acting like other environmental activists? For the committed group, environmentalists weren't actually seen as eccentric, but for the non-environmentalist group, this was more likely to be the case. Generally, therefore, the non-environmentalist has a negative view of environmentalism in society, with other peoples' actions seen as being eccentric and unimportant to their own behaviour.

Yet this simple conclusion masks the fact that almost half of this group did feel good about helping the environment ('Satisfaction'). This therefore raises the question of how much individuals, while reporting their unconcern and apathy in the face of other peoples' behaviour, are actually likely to ignore these social processes.

The fact may be that people who don't help the environment a great deal may be acting under a subtle social pressure that is exerted by peer group members – in the case of non-environmentalists, young males. While outwardly this group may state that environmentalism does not matter and that they are unaffected by increasing levels of environmental action, they may nonetheless admit to feeling good about helping the environment.

Reaching the non-environmentalist

In this series of three articles on modern environmentalism in Britain we have examined the environmentalist from the

perspective of who they are, what values they hold, and how they view environmental action. Environmentalists are generally older, female, well educated, and politically active. They hold environmental values that tend to view nature as equal with humanity and hold that development must occur in a holistic framework with nature. Indeed, they are concerned about environmental issues, find helping the environment easy and are confident in the positive outcomes of their behaviour.

Yet from the perspective of policy, the environmentalist is not really of concern. It is rather the significant group of individuals who have persistently low rates of recycling, energy saving, water conservation, and green consumption who provide practitioners with the greatest challenge.

They are a distinct group demographically, being young, male, on very low incomes, often living in local authority housing, and with low educational attainment. They are politically apathetic. They generally hold values that see the environment as inferior to humanity and believe that development through technical advances offers the best hope of alleviating environmental problems. In addition, their attitudes show low levels of environmental concern, negative

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perceptions of the convenience of helping the environment, and a rejection of the emerging social norm of environmental action. Yet they are likely to feel good about helping the environment and do perceive a tangible threat from environmental problems.

These last two facts provide a cause for hope. This group does have some feeling for the environment. However, at present they perceive that environmentalism is still the preserve of 'eccentric' citizens and that it isn't really important.

Indeed, their low levels of behaviour may also be accounted for by lack of services and an inability to pay for many environmental friendly products, such as energy-efficient light bulbs or organic foods, both of which are more expensive than conventional equivalents. Changing the behaviour of this group may therefore be as much about changing perceptions and service levels as about altering fundamental values.

In contrast to the collectivism of 30 years ago, environmentalism in Britain today is personalised and individualistic, focusing on household behaviours. It is

generally well supported, and there is much to hope for in the coming years. Nonetheless, local policy-makers, particularly in local authorities and NGOs, need to quickly refocus efforts away from the successes of converting middle England over to the new environmentalism, towards a concerted attempt to convert the young of deprived Britain, who are statistically less likely to engage in a range of environmental actions. Given the consumer power of this small but significant group, there is an urgent need for policy-makers to address negative perceptions of environmentalism in new ways and to ensure that services in low-income areas do not lag behind the leafy suburbs.

This may necessitate the use of both traditional and innovative techniques. There is good evidence on which to base a campaign aimed at specific groups of individuals in particular areas, but there is also the need to find new ways to reach young people, not traditionally associated with the public meeting or environmental campaign. Reaching such individuals may require unconventional techniques, such as enlisting specific respected individuals within the community to promote environmental action. If the major difficulty in changing behaviour is social acceptance, then it may require significant members of a community to lead the way in shifting attitudes and action.

It is therefore vital to address the widely held view among such individuals that environmentalism is still the communal and activist-based activity that it was when O'Riordan penned his classic text.⁵ Rather, environmentalism has become part of everyday life and has gradually become less about the environment and more concerned with participating in yet another socially desirable activity. ■

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Notes

- 1 S. Barr, A. Gilg, and N. Ford: 'Environmentalism' in Britain today – who are the environmentalists?. *Town & Country Planning*, 2003, 72, Jul., pp.185-186; and S. Barr, A. Gilg, and N. Ford: 'Environmentalism' in Britain today – how do people value the environment?. *Town & Country Planning*, 2003, 72, Aug., pp.216-217
- 2 Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number R000239417
- 3 S. Barr: *Household Waste in Social Perspective: Values, Attitudes, Situation and Behaviour*. Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002
- 4 S. Barr: 'Are we all environmentalists now? Rhetoric and reality in environmental action'. *Geoforum*, (In press)
- 5 T. O'Riordan: *Environmentalism*. Pion, London, 1976