

'Environmentalism' in Britain today – how do people value the environment?

In the second 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 survey evidence on whether committed environmentalists have undergone a step-change in their values, or whether values are unimportant in the environmental debate

In the first article in this series on environmentalism in Britain,¹ we demonstrated how the shift from collective to individual actions for environmental preservation has become embedded in the everyday lives of a majority of the population. This new environmentalism involves subtle shifts in lifestyle and daily habits that incorporate a wide range of behaviours, from energy-saving and water conservation, through to buying green consumer products and recycling household waste.

Four major groups of individuals were identified that related to their relative commitment to these activities, with the majority of individuals engaging with some of the activities sporadically, while, as might have been anticipated, smaller groups of individuals always or never undertook these behaviours.

These groups were broken down according to their demographic profile, and a distinct pattern emerged. Those most committed to environmental action tended to be older, owned their own home, and were more active in their community, being more likely to vote and, within this, more likely to vote Liberal Democrat. In contrast, those least committed to environmental action were younger and tended to be male, from larger families on very low incomes, and politically apathetic.

The key question arising from these initial findings relates to how these individuals, who represent two extremes of the new environmentalism, differ in other aspects. A significant amount of research has indicated that differences occur in relation to both people's values and attitudes.

This second article focuses on the possibility that committed environmentalists hold different values from non-environmentalists. In particular, we seek to examine the priorities in life that these groups have and how they view the environment. Effectively, we ask if there has been a step-change in values for these committed environmentalists, or whether values are unimportant in the environmental debate.

Social values and environmentalism

The research on which this series is based was undertaken in the summer of 2002 and involved a questionnaire survey of 1,600 households in Devon. This posed questions relating to the frequency with which individuals undertook environmental actions, their personal demographics, and a series of other items examining values and attitudes. The research was part of a large Economic and Social Research Council project² examining environmental action in and around the home.

As part of the questionnaire, a series of questions were asked relating to people's social values. Evidence from social researchers such as Schwartz³ and Stern *et al.*⁴ has indicated that individual

commitment to the environment varies according to whether individuals are altruistic or egoistic and whether they are open to change or conservative in nature. The research has shown that those who are more willing to help others and more likely to tolerate social change are also more likely to help the environment. However, these studies have been based on American samples, and it is therefore arguable whether British people share these values.

Accordingly, we asked people how important each of 16 values were in their daily lives as guiding principles. The table below, left shows how many people stated that they thought each of the values were very important or important in their lives, according to whether they were a committed environmentalist or non-environmentalist.

The data show some interesting trends, although they are by no means as conclusive as results from America would have suggested. There appears to be little difference between the values that represent altruistic or open characteristics. This is probably because people felt that nearly all these values were important to their lives – which given the nature of the items is not surprising. However, more significant differences are apparent when the conservative and egoistic factors are examined.

Committed environmentalists were more likely to believe in the importance of unity and obedience – that is to say, consensus and agreement – and were significantly less likely to place value on personal wealth. To this end, the findings suggest a conceptual difference in values between those who engage in different levels of environmental behaviour, with a less hedonistic and more socially conscious group comprising the committed cluster of individuals. Nonetheless, these results do not suggest that the new environmentalism is particularly driven by differences in fundamental values throughout society.

What the data do show, however, is the structure of how values transcend different

Survey respondents' views on values

| | Committed environmentalists (294), per cent important / very important | Non-environmentalists (43), per cent important / very important |
|----|--|---|
| | Altruism | |
| 93 | Loyalty | 97 |
| 90 | Honouring parents | 98 |
| 91 | Equality | 82 |
| 93 | Social justice | 86 |
| 85 | Enjoying life | 97 |
| 86 | Helpful | 69 |
| | Open to change | |
| 82 | Varied life | 68 |
| 68 | Exciting life | 71 |
| 72 | Curious | 59 |
| | Conservative | |
| 71 | Social order | 71 |
| 75 | Obedience | 62 |
| 44 | Authority | 37 |
| 90 | Unity | 53 |
| | Egoism | |
| 40 | Wealth | 58 |
| 12 | Social power | 22 |
| 43 | Influential | 50 |

Survey respondents' views on valuing nature

| Committed environmentalists (294), per cent agree / strongly agree | | Non-environmentalists (43), per cent agree / strongly agree | |
|---|--|--|--|
| Human dominance / technological solutions | | | |
| 25 | Humans were created to rule over nature | 51 | |
| 26 | There are no limits to growth for nations like the UK | 42 | |
| 24 | Modifying the environment seldom causes serious problems | 53 | |
| 19 | Science will help us to live without conservation | 53 | |
| 64 | Technology will solve many environmental problems | 31 | |
| Equality with nature / ecological solutions | | | |
| 92 | The balance of nature is delicate and easily upset | 82 | |
| 89 | The Earth is like a space ship, with limited room and resources | 74 | |
| 86 | Plants and animals do not exist primarily for human use | 63 | |
| 72 | One of the most important reasons for conservation is to preserve wild areas | 68 | |
| 69 | Exploitation of resources should be stopped | 51 | |

types of individual and the differing importance placed on specific values. While nearly all individuals felt altruistic values were important, they were less convinced about the significance of social order, authority, and personal influence. They were also less likely to feel that wealth was a significant factor in their lives.

These results are intrinsically important. They indicate that the stereotypical and media-driven view of a selfish and individualistic society is one that needs re-examination. The people surveyed did believe that being helpful and loyal and the pursuit of equity and social justice were important. The notion that society has become a hedonistic and self-seeking concoction of individuals thus appears somewhat misplaced. However, despite these observations, there is little to suggest that there are crucial differences between environmentalists based on these values.

Valuing nature

The way people value nature and relate to the environment has been examined widely by social researchers. They have found that environmental action has tended to vary according to whether individuals think of the environment as equal or subordinate to humanity,⁵ and also according to how they think society should deal with environmental dilemmas, be that through cutting back development or by using technology to overcome environmental problems.⁶ Our questionnaire examined a range of these concepts, as shown in the table above. The table shows how far individuals in the two groups agreed with each idea.

With respect to the extent to which individuals felt humans were dominant and that technological solutions should resolve environmental dilemmas, majorities in most cases were either equivocal or disagreed with sentiments of human dominance. This trend points to what may be a significant shift in social attitudes in society towards the environment – away from a notion of humans as dominant and

towards them being of equal importance with nature. Yet this simple conclusion must be treated with a healthy scepticism. One of the key characteristics of the new environmentalism is the embedded nature of environmental discourse in everyday life. In other words, we may have all learnt the language of environmentalism, even if we have not developed a suitable behavioural response.

This assertion is supported by those items that related to equality with nature and an ecologically informed solution to environmental dilemmas. It therefore appears, on the basis of the evidence here, that environmental values have become embedded in our society almost irrespective of behavioural commitment, with individuals stating that they are aware of the sensitive nature of the environment and are also conscious of the ways in which degradation can be reduced.

Nonetheless, the results did show that there were statistically significant differences between the committed environmentalists and non-environmentalists, which are evident from the table. Consistently, a significantly higher proportion of committed environmentalists agreed with pro-environmental values. The data therefore reveal that within a generally pro-environmental position, non-environmentalists were more likely to question the value of nature and the potential solutions to reducing environmental dilemmas.

The new environmental outlook

These results paint a somewhat different picture of environmentalists to the definitive portrait described in the previous article. Committed environmentalists were clearly defined demographically, with discernable characteristics and a clear social profile. With regard to social and environmental values, in certain cases committed environmentalists do stand out from the non-environmentalists, in terms of their outlook on life and how they view nature. They are more likely to believe in

unity and obedience, and they place far less emphasis on personal wealth. In general, they may be less hedonistic and place more value on altruistic concerns. Committed individuals are more likely to hold that nature and humans are of equal importance, and that an ecologically-driven solution to environmental issues should be sought.

However, while these patterns are statistically significant, it is important to note that the trends observed were invariably in one direction. Individuals generally held altruistic values and were tolerant of changes in social circumstance. They were pro-environmental and held values that emphasised the importance of nature.

Such a finding indicates that environmental issues appear to have entered the public consciousness in a way that has not been observed previously. There was an overwhelming public acceptance of pro-environmental values that was not anticipated. Respondents may well be representing such views, which could be seen as a positive step. If this is the case, then society has undergone a major shift, away from the hedonistic and individualistic values of the 1980s, towards an environmentally conscious and preservationist position.

However, these data may also present policy-makers with a fundamental problem. If these values are held by most people, or at least reported to be, how do practitioners change the behaviour of those non-environmentalists who are evidently not acting according to their stated values? This is a question that will be elaborated on in the final article, where we examine the data that show the motivations and barriers for helping the environment. ■

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Notes

- 1 S. Barr, A. Glig, and N. Ford: 'Environmentalism in Britain today – who are the environmentalists?'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2003, 72, Jul., pp.185-186
- 2 Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number R000239417
- 3 S.H. Schwartz: 'Universals in the content and structure of values: theoretical advances and empirical test in 20 countries'. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 1992, 10, pp.221-279
- 4 P.C. Stern, T. Dietz, and G.A. Guagnano: 'The new ecological paradigm in social-psychological context'. *Environment & Behavior*, 1995, 27, pp.723-743
- 5 R.E. Dunlap, K.D. Van Liere, A.G. Mertig, and R.E. Jones: 'Measuring Endorsement of the New Ecological Paradigm: a revised NEP scale'. *Journal of Social Issues*, 2000, 56, pp.425-442
- 6 T. O'Riordan: *Environmentalism*. Pion, London, 1976