



Results of National Survey Executive Summary

November 1999

In a national telephone survey for The Ocean Project, Belden Russonello & Stewart, in collaboration with American Viewpoint, explored the public's connections, values, attitudes, and knowledge relating to the oceans.

The survey was conducted among 1,500 adults living in the U.S. in telephone-equipped households. Interviewing took place from July 24 to August 8. The margin of sampling error for the study is +/-2.5 percentage points.

Findings

Aquariums, zoos, and museums have a unique opportunity to educate the public about the importance of oceans. One in three Americans have visited these institutions in the last twelve months. At the moment, Americans are unaware of the threats to ocean health and they greatly underestimate their own role in damaging the oceans. The public values the oceans for their recreational and emotional aspects, but their understanding of why we need the oceans is superficial. Consequently, while many Americans express an emotional connection to the oceans, awareness and concerns about the oceans' health are low.

A. Americans have little knowledge of ocean functions

Americans possess a superficial knowledge of the oceans. The public knows generally that the oceans are essential to human survival and that we need to protect them. However, many are unaware of the specific functions of the oceans and their own part in damaging the health of the oceans.

- Three-quarters of Americans (75%) strongly agree that the health of the oceans is essential to human survival. However, the public's understanding of why the oceans are important and the damage now being done to them is superficial.
- When Americans are asked to answer five questions on knowledge of oceans' functions, most Americans (69%) can answer no more than two of five questions correctly. Only 10% give correct answers to four or more of the questions. The average correct answers on the five-point knowledge scale is 1.9.
 - Six in 10 (60%) Americans know that the climate and amount of rainfall on earth is regulated more by the oceans than by the rotation of the earth.
 - Fifty-four percent believes that the extinction of plant and animal life in the oceans is caused mainly by humans, rather than by a combination of human and natural causes.
 - But only four in 10 (39%) know that more plant and animal life is found in the oceans than on land.
 - Only two in 10 (21%) Americans know that oceans produce more of the earth's oxygen than forests.
 - When asked to choose the main source of ocean pollution among three sources, only 14% of Americans select the correct answer-- "runoff from yards, pavement, and farms." Most (66%) choose "waste dumped by industry," and 16% believe most pollution is from trash and litter washed into the oceans from beaches.

B. But, there is broad awareness of the oceans' vulnerability

While Americans may not have a full understanding of the functions of the oceans, majorities believe that the oceans are vulnerable and can be damaged by humans.

- Eight in ten (80%) reject the idea that the oceans are so large, it is unlikely that humans will cause lasting damage to them (56% disagree strongly).
- Another eight in ten (81%) reject the idea that we don't need to worry about the health of the oceans because we will develop new technologies to keep them clean (55% disagree strongly).
- Seven in ten (72%) disagree that the oceans are able to clean themselves (46% disagree strongly).

- However, 45% agree and 55% disagree that “what I do in my life doesn’t impact ocean health much at all.”

When the public thinks about damage being done to the oceans, they quickly point a finger at industry. Therefore, humans generally are thought to be doing harm to the oceans, but individuals are not considered responsible as the main source of pollution or damage.

C. The oceans are not perceived to be in immediate danger

At the moment, the oceans are not perceived to be in immediate danger, and the need for action to protect the oceans is not readily apparent.

- When asked about the health of the open, deep oceans and of coastal waters and beaches, close to half of the public (46%) reports that they do not know enough about the open oceans to give an opinion and slightly over a quarter (27%) say so for coastal waters.
- Nearly four in ten Americans (39%) rate the health of coastal waters and ocean beaches as “only fair,” a quarter (25%) say they are good or excellent, and only one in ten (11%) say poor.
- Damage to the oceans is considered a second-tier environmental problem when compared to other environmental problems. Two in ten (19%) Americans report that damage being done to the open, deep oceans is an extremely serious problem. A quarter (24%) report that damage to coastal waters is extremely serious and two in ten (22%) report the same for damage to ocean beaches. These threats to the oceans are seen as less serious than air (31%) and water (36%) pollution and toxic waste (36%), and about as serious as global climate change (21%), species extinction (23%), and overconsumption of resources in the U.S. (24%).