



America and the Ocean

annual update 2011

Introduction

In our continuing effort to help zoos, aquariums, and museums (ZAMs) become stronger leaders for conservation, The Ocean Project is pleased to provide the first in a series of annual updates on its ongoing research into Americans' attitudes towards ocean conservation.

To assist our approximately 1,500 partner ZAMs and other conservation and education organizations in their efforts to understand and inspire their audiences, leading to advances in ocean conservation, we are presenting five key themes from our latest findings:

1. Concern for the ocean
2. Understanding of the threats
3. Willingness to act
4. Importance of teens
5. Expectations of ZAMs

Our latest research adds new insight into the matters of audience and message, underscoring the importance of reaching the younger generations and emphasizing the need to communicate in terms of particular places, specific species, and personal actions. It also reinforces much of what we already learned about messengers and tactics, specifically the way in which the public expects and trusts ZAMs to give “green” guidance, onsite and online.



These findings are based on comprehensive national research completed in April-May 2011 and informed by a series of national tracking surveys conducted since our baseline study presented in *America, the Ocean, and Climate Change: New Research Insights for Conservation, Awareness, and Action* (2009) and *Communicating About Oceans: Results of a National Survey* (1999), both of which are available at www.TheOceanProject.org/MarketResearch.



key findings

1. Concern for the ocean

Urgency, or lack thereof, is the core issue with the public’s sentiment about ocean conservation. The more we study attitudes toward the ocean — and specifically attitudes toward ocean conservation — the more we understand that for the public, it is less a matter of ambivalence and more a question of urgency. In other words, the public as a whole does not need to be convinced that ocean conservation is important. Rather, they need to be prompted with reasons to act now.

This was never more apparent than in the aftermath of the recent Deepwater Horizon drilling disaster (the “BP Oil Spill”). Our tracking surveys showed spikes in both absolute and relative concern about the health of the ocean, as well as an increase in demands for ocean conservation. This was even more true of ZAM visitors (*see figure 1*).

Yet, almost as soon as the oil spill stories stopped filling the news, attention returned to what are considered more “top-of-mind” matters, such as the health of the economy and the availability of jobs.

Implication

» The majority of visitors are already in favor of ocean conservation and need no convincing, i.e. ZAMs can focus messaging on the need to act now and provide visitors with ways to help personally.

2. Understanding of the threats

There is no evidence to indicate that the public’s awareness and understanding of the major ocean threats, such as climate change, overfishing and pollution, has increased since our report in 2009, nor since our initial research in 1999.

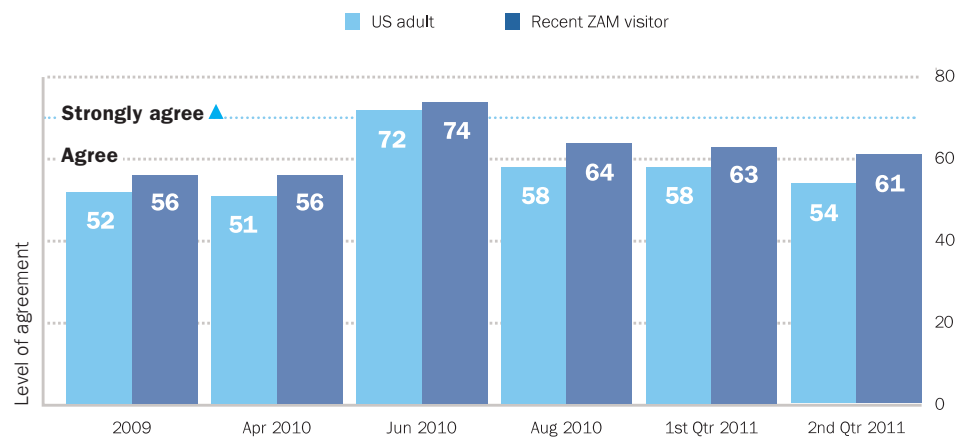
While climate change is essentially the only environmental issue to break into the top tier of public concerns, our research offers three reasons why this issue is increasingly difficult to address in the context of ocean conservation.

First, the overall level of concern about climate change has been declining, as more Americans believe it is “overstated” as an issue.

Second, only a small percentage of the public understands that climate change is also a threat to the ocean, even as nearly two-thirds now accept that climate change is occurring.

And third, climate change — at least with adults — has become increasingly politicized, making it difficult to have a discussion of scientific fact that is separate from political opinion.

Level of agreement: Americans’ underlying concern for the ocean can be brought to the surface by current events, such as the Deepwater Horizon disaster of late April 2010. These three graphs show the level of agreement with the statement on a scale of 0-100, with a score over 60 representing agreement, and a score over 70 representing strong agreement.



Protecting the ocean should be a priority for the U.S. government

FIGURE 1

Overfishing is not perceived as a threat to the ocean, but the public is concerned about seafood sustainability (see figure 2). Their worries primarily derive from health concerns, and they express a willingness to change their eating habits. The catch is that when it comes to making those choices, Americans are completely confused, not knowing the good from the bad.

Pollution, especially a point source such as an oil spill, is widely accepted as a problem. But, as shown in the reaction to the BP Oil Spill disaster, it is not believed to pose a longterm nor ocean-wide threat.

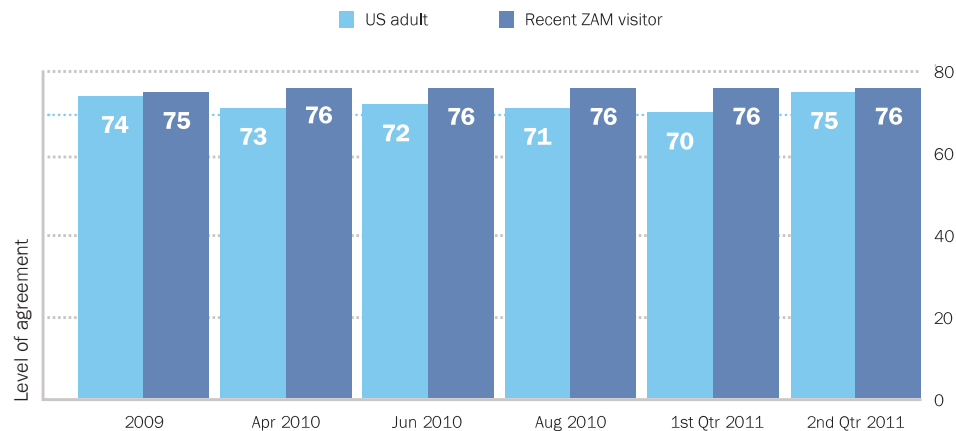
This brings us to what appear to be the two major impediments to increasing Americans' understanding of these and other ocean threats.

The first is a matter of scale. The public simply has a hard time believing that anything could compromise the long-term health of something that is, in their words, as "vast, huge, powerful and mighty" as "the ocean." And the same can be said about something as abstract in their view as "the climate."

The other is an issue of national pride. While probing the problem of scale, we asked about the health not of "the ocean," but of the Atlantic or Pacific as opposed to the Arctic or Indian Oceans. The results are striking. Americans believe, even when faced with evidence to the contrary, that America is a better ocean steward than other nations. They also believe that "our oceans" — the Atlantic and Pacific — are in much better shape than other oceans.

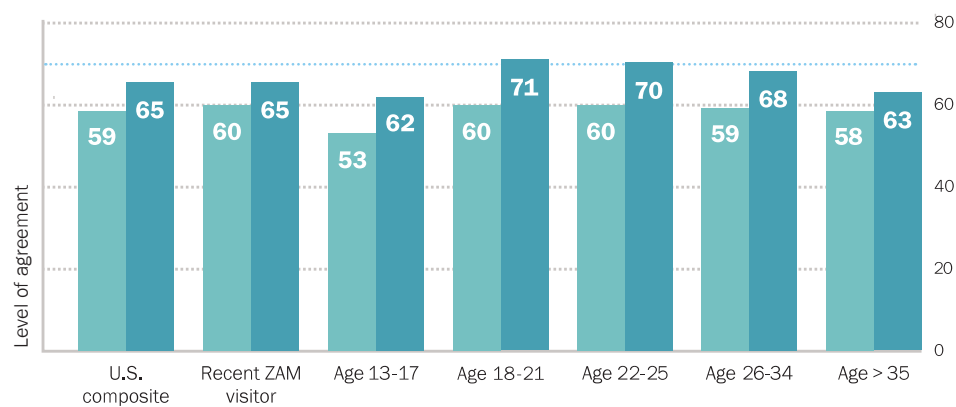
Implication

» The public is much more likely to understand and accept information about threats when it is presented in relation to a particular place or specific species rather than in terms of "the ocean" or "the climate," and presented in ways that relate to them personally.



I would change my seafood eating habits to protect and/or preserve an endangered species.

FIGURE 2



- I am informed about climate change.
- When it comes to climate change, the actions of individual people can make a positive difference.

FIGURE 3

3. Willingness to act

Americans overwhelmingly see themselves as "green-friendly" and are looking for ways to reinforce and project that self-perception. This is not to suggest in any way that the public is looking to make a wholesale shift to a more sustainable lifestyle, but it is an indication that they are open to taking a few steps in that direction and are interested in seeing themselves as part of the solution rather than as part of the problem.

Data clearly reveals that the public's willingness to take steps towards

a solution is largely disconnected from their level of understanding of a problem (see figure 3). In other words, Americans are prepared to take action for conservation not necessarily because they understand why or whether they believe it would make a significant difference to the environment, but because it is consistent with their self-identity as being "green".

Implication

» Start with the solution. Suggest small but significant actions that both help address a problem and align with visitors'

desire to be — and be seen as — “green.” Remember to also include your audience as part of the solution (rather than as part of the problem).

4. Importance of teens

In keeping with the old adage, “it is not what you are saying but who is listening,” our research has been going beyond the findings for the “general public” to compare results between specific subsets of Americans. Above all else, this has led us to the importance of reaching youth, especially teenagers.

Teens not only have the highest level of concern about the problems facing the world’s ocean, and are most open to new information, but also are the most confident in their ability to make a difference (*see figure 3*). Furthermore, teens want to take action now and many are already helping.

Two core findings underscore the importance of youth:

1. Youth are increasingly asked for advice on environmental issues by the adults in their families, and
2. Adults are united in their support for teaching the younger generations how to care for our blue planet, even while they themselves are divided on issues such as climate change.

Implication

» Focusing on youth, and teens in particular, is likely the most effective way to engage the public and advance ocean conservation.



NOAA's National Ocean Service

5. Expectations of ZAMs

ZAMs continue to be seen as a good, and often the best, source of information about the ocean and conservation.

They continue to attract a segment of the public that, on the whole, is more interested in these issues.

While ZAM visitors indicate that their primary reason for visiting is not necessarily to be educated, they are also explicit in their expectations that ZAMs provide information on what to do to act for conservation. However, interest in obtaining this information onsite continues to wane when compared to going online.

In keeping with our earlier findings, the primary means by which the American public, especially youth, increasingly wants to access information about the ocean and ocean conservation is via the Internet.

Implication

» ZAMs have an important role to play in informing and inspiring the public. They can turn their visitors’ heightened interest into action by communicating effectively onsite and, increasingly, online.

Online and onsite visitors are looking for more than awareness and literacy building. They are looking to ZAMs to provide action items.

Methodology

Tracking survey data was based on more than 12,000 responses from adults in the United States between April and May of 2011. The survey was conducted online, and respondents were screened, certified, and paid. The sample accurately reflects the U.S. population, and the overall confidence level is 99%. Updates and the full research report are available at www.TheOceanProject.org/MarketResearch.

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