



Inspiring  
visitors and  
advancing  
conservation

# an ocean of opportunities

## Introduction

**In support of our partner zoos, aquariums, and museums (ZAMs) and other visitor-serving organizations,** The Ocean Project has conducted national public opinion research on ocean issues since its formation in the late 1990s. This document offers a summary of that research including new data from 2014, with an emphasis on research helping ZAMs, as well as the wider conservation community, in efforts to advance ocean and climate conservation.



The research has led to a dramatic increase in our collective understanding of public opinion about the ocean. Beginning with an initial snapshot of qualitative and quantitative research, the investigation expanded in 2008 into a series of advanced surveys using leading-edge approaches to gather more than 100,000 opinions and regularly tracked changes.

Together with the help of IMPACTS Research, and in collaboration with Monterey Bay Aquarium and National Aquarium, The Ocean Project's research has developed into what is believed to be the largest and most comprehensive public opinion study ever undertaken on behalf of any environmental concern. The research also helped illuminate the critical role that ZAMs can play in advancing ocean and climate conservation, with guidance as to how these institutions can engage their audiences more effectively for conservation outcomes and impact.





## Baseline research 1998–1999

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**In 1998, The Ocean Project**, with funding from The David and Lucile Packard Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, partnered with the firms of Belden Russonello & Stewart<sup>1</sup> and American Viewpoint to provide ZAMs with an understanding of national public opinion about the ocean. The goal at the time was to inform efforts to better engage the public, increase awareness and raise concern.

The resulting report — an unpublished, but widely distributed paper entitled, “Communicating About Oceans: Results of a National Survey” (October 1999) — was based on a review of prior research, a set of focus groups, and a national telephone survey (n=1500). It established what is widely considered the baseline for public opinion on these issues. The top findings from that report were as follows:

- » The ocean is viewed as powerful, vast, relaxing, and fun.
- » Little awareness exists of ocean health, especially beyond the beach.
- » Protecting the oceans is seen as important but not urgent.
- » While they have only superficial knowledge of the oceans and their functions, Americans strongly agree that the health of the oceans is essential to human survival.

- » The ocean is viewed as vulnerable to lasting damage from humans. People see industry as the main culprit and do not see individual actions as having a great impact.
  - » The motivations behind concern for the ocean are based on personal values, such as concern for the well-being of family and future generations, rather than factual knowledge.
  - » The “balance of nature” values framework resonates strongly.
  - » Americans are willing to support actions to protect the ocean.
- Notably, the report identified “zoo and aquarium goers” as a high potential audience, a group more likely to recognize the oceans’ vulnerabilities, and understand that individual actions impact ocean health.



## Expanded research 2008–2009

**In 2008**, with funding from NOAA, The Ocean Project — in collaboration with the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the National Aquarium — began working with IMPACTS Research on a new round of comprehensive research. Again, the intent was to inform efforts to better engage the public, while noting that those efforts were increasingly aimed less at raising awareness and more at inspiring action.

With that in mind, the project was much larger in size, and the results much richer in detail. More than 22,000 responses were obtained, primarily online, in the summer and fall of 2008, and the resulting report, “America, the Ocean, and Climate Change: New Research Insights for Conservation, Awareness, and Action,” was presented in June of 2009.<sup>2</sup> The report offered an updated understanding of national public opinion about the ocean, climate change and related issues, along with new insights into how people think about those issues, where they get their information, and what they expect of ZAMs.

Overall, the results were not encouraging, as the survey showed that most of the top five findings from 1999 still held true. While the public continued to express awe and appreciation for the ocean, they still had little awareness (let alone knowledge) of the ocean or the issues affecting ocean health, and still did not appear to see a strong need for ocean conservation.

Deeper in the data, more hopeful signs could be seen. Foremost among them were the following:

- » While issue awareness remained low and top-of-mind urgency was still lacking, the public, when asked, expressed underlying support for the concept of conserving the ocean and the environment.
- » The public expected ZAMs to engage them on these issues, and trusted their guidance as to what should be done.
- » Tweens, teens and young adults, as well as those from households where English was not the primary language, were more likely than others to be both interested in and willing to act on ocean conservation and environmental issues.
- » In a significant break from the findings of the earlier research, this survey found a renewed belief, especially among young people, that individual actions could have a positive impact, exemplified by an expressed willingness to change seafood eating habits to help save threatened species

In sum, the report offered confirmation that engagement efforts aimed at inspiring action were aimed in the right direction. And it encouraged the expansion of such efforts onsite and online, while also noting that the public, and especially the younger generations, increasingly preferred to get information about environmental issues via the Internet.

**Emphasizing your conservation mission can grow public trust and attendance: People expect and appreciate recommendations from aquariums, zoos, and museums about how to help with solutions to environmental and ocean conservation issues.**



**Emotional connections work: People are inspired by stories about the impacts on specific animals and particular places, rather than facts and figures.**





## Tracking surveys 2009–2012

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**This more recent round of research** — unlike the initial research which offered only a single snapshot in time — was extended in order to track changes over time. With multiple surveys over the subsequent months and years, understanding of public opinion, and especially engagement opportunities, expanded and deepened.

Perhaps most important, the tracking results confirmed the way in which people expect and trust zoos and aquariums

to engage them on these issues, and underscored the higher levels of interest from younger generations. The tracking surveys also offered new insights that are helping to inform efforts aimed at inspiring action. These insights included the following:

- » While Americans’ knowledge of ocean issues has remained consistently low, interest in ocean conservation can be highly variable.
- » High interest in conservation often can be correlated with newsworthy events, especially those that show visible impacts on particular places or specific species, as evidenced by a robust spike of public concern during the disastrous oil spill at Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico.
- » Americans appear to be reluctant to accept that the ocean as a whole is in trouble, likely due to a persistent perception that the ocean is “vast and powerful,” and therein is assumed to be resilient.

» Public concern about climate change has risen and fallen, but has yet to be connected with ocean impacts.

» Americans increasingly believe that they live “green” lifestyles, yet are lacking information from trusted sources that can inform their own actions.

» Americans tend to believe that the United States is a leader on climate change and ocean issues, and that the oceans that touch the U.S. — the Atlantic and the Pacific — are much healthier than those that are further away, such as the Indian Ocean.

The findings from the tracking surveys reinforced that zoos and aquariums are trusted and can play an important role in ocean conservation. The findings also suggested that this role can be maximized by relaying the stories and recommending steps that can help individuals turn their concern for the ocean and interest in “being green” into actions that truly help conserve the places and animals with which they connect emotionally.



**Providing inspiration:**  
Visits to aquariums, zoos, and museums can activate people’s underlying interest in protecting the ocean and its animals.

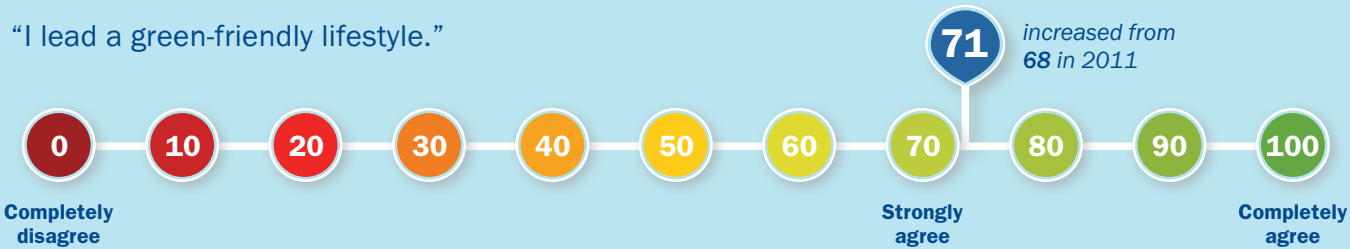
## An opportunity for aquariums, zoos, and museums to anchor collective action

There’s strong agreement across the country that reflects the way people, especially the younger generations, are increasingly interested in “going green,” and are looking for recommended conservation actions from trusted organizations with whom they can have a great collective impact.

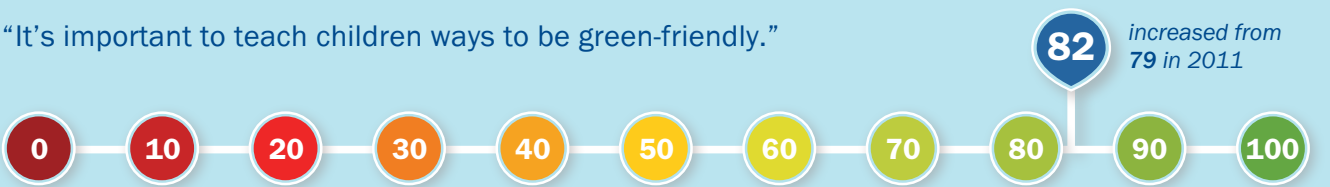
Agreement scores are based on a scale from 0 to 100. Scores of 70 or greater indicate very strong public agreement with a statement.

### Americans increasingly see themselves as “green.”

“I lead a green-friendly lifestyle.”

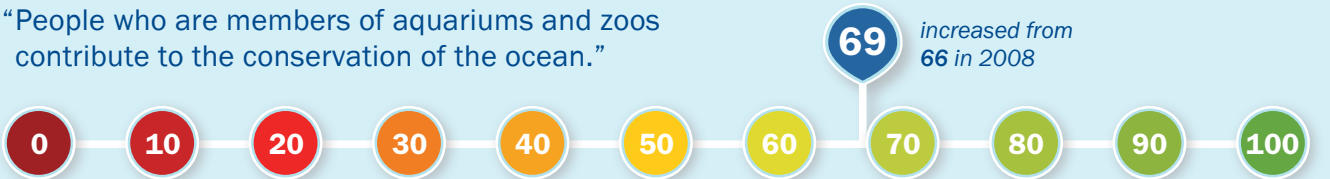


“It’s important to teach children ways to be green-friendly.”

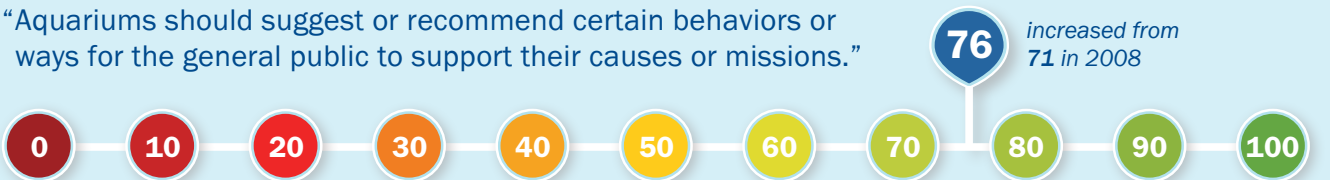


### Aquariums, zoos, and museums can be community anchors for collective action.

“People who are members of aquariums and zoos contribute to the conservation of the ocean.”



“Aquariums should suggest or recommend certain behaviors or ways for the general public to support their causes or missions.”







understanding public opinion about the emergent issue of ocean acidification, they also yielded some valuable insights into the broader topic of public engagement in conservation efforts. The most notable of these findings were:

» Visiting an aquarium, zoo, or science museum appears to initiate a spike in concern for the ocean, similar to seeing a news story, and inspires an emotion-based interest in helping the animals and conserving their habitats.

» The public not only expects and trusts, but also appreciates conservation information, especially about the actions that they can take to be a part of the solution, believing receipt of such guidance is part of a satisfying visit.

With all of the aforementioned research in hand, The Ocean Project then launched in 2013 an “Innovative Solutions Grants+ Program” to provide aquariums and zoos with

grants and pro bono consulting for projects aimed at putting the key research findings to the test. The results to date are pointing to the following:

» The opportunity to inspire action appears to be limited and fleeting, with a preference for easy-to-understand and easy-to-implement steps that can be completed while onsite or online.

» Interactions with aquarium, zoo, or science museum staff appear to play an important role in inspiring actions and ensuring the success of a conservation “ask.”

» Visitors are highly motivated by having their local institution striving to “go green” with them (to tackle issues such as climate change or plastic pollution). This approach may prove to be as motivating as helping with actions to protect particular places or a specific species.



**The most recent round of research** by IMPACTS — with a sample size of over 11,000 respondents and gathered over nine weeks during June–August 2014 through online, telephone, and in-person surveys — includes the following findings:

» The public remains inspired by the ocean. While people feel that they are well informed about environmental issues (gradually increased since 2008), they remain largely unaware of actual ocean issues.

» Most people are unwilling to accept that the ocean as a whole is in trouble, and most still do not make the link between climate change and the oceans.

» People generally care about the environment and have positive feelings about the environmental movement and what it has accomplished.

» People view ZAMs as good sources of accurate information about environmental topics, including climate change and the oceans. They still believe there are better sources on the Internet, especially audiences under the age of 25.

» People have a very high level of trust in ZAMs, a lower level for NGOs, and the lowest level of trust for government, especially at the federal level.

» The public remains interested in being “green.” People are especially keen on the idea of teaching the youngest generations ways to be “green,” and see

taking a child to an aquarium or zoo as a way to give that child an advantage in their academic development.

» Increasingly, people recognize that climate change is an important issue, but they still tend to see it as more of a long-term and distant problem.

» Individuals question their own ability to impact climate change, and they tend to see the solutions as coming from technology.

» Confidence in the power of individual actions has declined significantly since 2008. This may be due to recognition that national and international action is needed to adequately address climate change.

» The importance of ocean conservation and the environment are better understood in national security and personal health and wellness terms, especially with younger audiences under the age of 25.

» People are eager for recommendations and strongly believe that ZAMs should suggest or recommend certain behaviors or ways to help, but also need actions appropriate to the scale of the issues, especially for younger audiences.

» The public sees membership in a zoo or aquarium as a good way to contribute to ocean conservation

» While visitation to ZAMs has not been keeping pace with population growth, there also is evidence that those institutions that highlight mission are outperforming the rest.<sup>3</sup>

This research initiative is allowing ZAMs and others involved in our partner network to be grounded in solid data in achieving their missions. We will continue to work with our partners to test the research and improve visitor engagement and communications for measurable outcomes. ZAMs are making a difference, but we need to do more, individually and collectively. The Ocean Project looks forward to promoting and collaborating with our partners as the key anchors for conservation leadership in their communities.

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**People want to be part of a larger effort: Connecting the conservation efforts of aquariums, zoos, and museums to what visitors can do in a “together we can” approach can help reach the scale necessary to effect meaningful change.**





## About The Ocean Project

The Ocean Project advances ocean conservation in partnership with zoos, aquariums, and museums (ZAMs) and other visitor-serving organizations around the world. Our aim is to help partner ZAMs effectively educate and communicate for action with their visitors and the public, helping to change attitudes and behaviors for conservation.

Since its formation in the late 1990s, The Ocean Project has grown from a handful of founding North American organizations – including the Monterey Bay Aquarium, National Aquarium, New England Aquarium, New York Aquarium, and Vancouver Aquarium, with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) and SeaWeb – into the world's most extensive network for advancing ocean education and action. Our growing network includes approximately 2,000 aquariums, zoos, science, technology, and natural history museums, and other education and conservation organizations, agencies, and institutions in all 50 U.S. states and 80 other countries that together serve more than 400 million visitors each year.

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Report written by The Ocean Project team: Douglas Meyer, Alyssa Isakower, and Bill Mott.

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## Footnotes

1. The firm is now known as Belden Russonello Strategists LLC.
2. The report can be found at [TheOceanProject.org/reports](http://TheOceanProject.org/reports). Click on "Comprehensive Surveys" and scroll down to "America, the Ocean, and Climate Change (2009)"
3. [colleendilen.com/2014/02/05/finding-museums-that-highlight-mission-financially-outperform-museums-that-market-primarily-as-attractions-data](http://colleendilen.com/2014/02/05/finding-museums-that-highlight-mission-financially-outperform-museums-that-market-primarily-as-attractions-data)

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