

Appendix M

National Geographic Society River Poll, 2001

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Be RiverSmart about things you do at home.
A River Network Project
Presented by
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APPENDIX:

Summary of Findings: National Geographic Society's River Poll

This summary highlights the major findings of a comprehensive, nationally representative telephone study among 750 American adults. The study was conducted in June 2001 by Penn, Schoen & Berland Associates of Washington D.C. The statistical significance of the results are +/- 4.4 percent at the 95th confidence interval level.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of the study are:

1. Environmental issues are important to Americans, and protecting and conserving rivers is a priority. Americans are concerned about the health of our rivers and express an interest in becoming involved in river conservation.
2. Americans have a low "River IQ": They lack basic knowledge about rivers, they fail to appreciate that they are part of a larger interrelated system in which their actions have negative effects, and they are unaware of the extent to which our rivers are in danger.
3. Americans cite lack of time, lack of information and lack of awareness of the problem as the major reasons they are not more personally involved in protecting and conserving rivers. Americans are willing to get involved to protect fish and wildlife and to ensure that we have clean drinking water, and view their involvement as a way to educate children on the importance of the environment.

- 1. Environmental issues are important to Americans, and protecting and conserving rivers is a priority. Americans are concerned about the health of our rivers and express an interest in becoming involved in river conservation.*

Protecting and Conserving Our Rivers is an Important Environmental Issue

Nearly all Americans (94%) said that environmental issues are important, with nearly two-thirds (64%) saying that they are very important. The health of our nation's rivers is clearly considered a very important environmental issue.

- Four in 10 Americans (40%) said that the pollution of drinking water (25%) and the pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs (15%) was the environmental issue that concerned them most. Only air pollution (36%) was considered more important as a discrete, unrelated issue.

- Nearly all Americans (98%) said that protecting and conserving our rivers was important as a discrete, unrelated issue.

Americans are Concerned About Rivers and are Interested in Helping

Nine in ten Americans (90%) said that they are concerned about the environmental quality and appearance of our nation's rivers and nearly half (46%) said that they were very concerned. And Americans are concerned enough to express an interest in getting involved.

- Nearly two in three Americans (65%) said they were interested in getting personally involved in conserving and protecting rivers.
- Although only 19% said they were very interested in getting involved, poll results clearly show that addressing the lack of awareness Americans have about rivers will generate much higher interest in river conservation.

2. Americans have a low "River IQ": They lack basic knowledge about rivers, they fail to appreciate that they are part of a larger interrelated system in which their actions have negative effects, and they are unaware of the extent to which our rivers are in danger.

Americans Have a Very Low River IQ

Americans lack knowledge of even the most basic river facts.

- Nearly two in three Americans (63%) wrongly believe that water is a renewable resource and an even greater number (66%) believe that rivers contain both fresh and salt water.
- Americans are completely unaware of the fact that rivers supply the majority of our drinking water. Although over 60% of our water comes from rivers and river-fed lakes, the average American believes it is 18%. Greater than 8 in 10 Americans (83%) underestimate the percentage of our drinking water supplied by rivers.
- It is not surprising that nearly 9 in 10 Americans (86%) do not know that riparian refers to the banks of a river or stream, but many Americans have great deal of trouble defining very basic and common terms associated with rivers, such as a watershed (44%) and flood plain (31%).
- Nearly all Americans (96%) can not correctly identify Missouri as the longest U.S. river – most think it is the Mississippi (79%) – and 44% do not know that the Mississippi is the largest, in terms of water.
- This country has over 250,000 rivers but 42% of Americans think it has under 50,000. In all, 57% of Americans underestimate the numbers of rivers in the country.

Lack of Awareness About How We All Live in an Interrelated System

What is significant about Americans' lack of knowledge is not that they have trouble identifying the longest river or defining common terms associated with rivers. It is that Americans are uninformed about the impact human action has on rivers and what constitutes the greatest threats to rivers. An uninformed public represents a major obstacle to addressing the dangers and threats to our nation's rivers because this lack of awareness can forestall effective action.

The poll revealed that there is a profound lack of awareness among Americans of the extent to which rivers exist within a larger system of a watershed, and that people, wildlife, and plant life are all connected to rivers through watersheds.

- Although all Americans live in a watershed – an area that, due to its natural drainage pattern and geography, collects rainfall, snowmelt or irrigation that runs over land and then deposits it into a particular body of water – 44% can not even define the term. In fact, 65% of Americans believe that a watershed and wetland are the same thing.
- Although nonpoint source pollution – which occurs when water runs over land or through the ground and picks up pollutants and deposits them into rivers – is the largest source of river pollution, nearly 9 in 10 Americans (86%) are completely unfamiliar with the term.

Lack of Awareness About How Our Actions Affect Rivers

Americans' lack of awareness that they are an integral part of a larger system and that their actions have profound impact on the water quality and appearance of rivers is directly related to their lack of knowledge that nonpoint source pollution is the greatest threat to our nation's rivers.

- Three times as many Americans (44%) incorrectly identify industrial sources, as opposed to people actions (15%), as the greatest source of river pollution. In fact, two-thirds of Americans (67%) believe that most pollution in rivers is from industrial sources.
- When asked how important a problem nonpoint source pollution is, only 19% correctly identified it as the largest source of water quality problems.

Much of this lack of awareness problem is related to how little Americans know about the importance of watershed health and how our actions within a watershed directly contribute to river pollution.

- Only one-third of Americans (35%) either identify land use, land development, and urban sprawl as the most serious threats to watershed health.

- Only 17% of Americans identified human actions in the watershed – agricultural run-off and urban sprawl – as the major threats to rivers. In fact, half of Americans (50%) believe that industrial facilities cause more water pollution than run-off from farms and cities in a watershed.
- A telling statistic that illustrates the extent of the lack of awareness is that Americans are not aware that 16 times more run-off is produced by a one acre parking lot compared to one acre of meadow. Nearly 7 in 10 (69%) of all Americans underestimated the difference in run off and over half (51%) thought that the difference was less than five times as much.
- When asked how large an oil slick is created by a person dumping a quart of oil down a storm drain, nearly half (45%) said 100 feet or less when the figure is in fact 2 acres. Over three-fourths of Americans (77%) severely underestimated the extent of a spill such a seemingly normal activity generated.

The lack of awareness of how Americans are interconnected to watersheds and that an interrelationship exists between human action and river impact is also a reason why so few Americans appreciate how valuable water is and how much water it actually takes to perform everyday tasks. The table below illustrates this point well.

This overall low level of awareness also helps explain why so many Americans are not aware of the dire situation that our rivers are in, in terms of the level of pollution and dangers to our wetlands and river species.

- The average American estimates that 16% of rivers and streams in this country are too polluted for fishing and swimming but the

Gallons of Water Needed for Common Household Tasks	Actually Required	What Americans Think is Needed	% Americans Underestimate
Running the washing machine	30	15	92%
Running the dishwasher	15	9	89%
Flushing the toilet	5	4	97%
Taking a 10 minute shower	50	26	99%

Gallons of Water Needed by Industry for Producing Food	Actually Required	What Americans Think is Needed	% Americans Underestimate
Growing one head of lettuce	6	3	83%
Producing one 8 oz. glass of milk	49	29	89%
Producing single serving of steak	2,600	99	99%

actual figure is 40%. Greater than 8 in 10 Americans (81%) underestimate the extent of river pollution.

- The average American estimates that 19% of our wetlands have been lost or destroyed in the past century but the actual figure is closer to 50%. Again, greater than 8 in 10 Americans (81%) underestimate the extent of this problem.
- The average American estimates that 22% of native freshwater fish in North America are endangered or threatened when the actual figure is 30%. Greater than 6 in 10 Americans (62%) estimate a level of danger below the actual figure.

3. Americans cite lack of time, lack of information and lack of awareness of the problem as the major reasons they are not more personally involved in protecting and conserving rivers. Americans are willing to get involved to protect fish and wildlife and to ensure that we have clean drinking water and view their involvement as a way to educate children on the importance of the environment.

Americans admit that they have not been actively involved in taking steps to protect and conserve rivers and the reasons they cite are lack of time, lack of information on how to help, and a lack of awareness that our rivers are so badly threatened. But Americans also say that they are willing to take personal actions and they express interest in learning more about conservation and awareness programs.

Americans Not Currently Involved: Stress Lack of Time and Lack of Information

Nearly 7 out of 10 Americans (68%) say they are not currently involved in river conservation and protection, and only 7% say they are “very involved.”

- A majority of Americans (53%) say that the first or second most important reason they are not involved is that they simply do not have enough time. This finding reflects their lack of awareness at how easy it is to take certain steps.
- Over one-third of Americans (35%) express the sentiment “I don’t know how I can help.” The identification of this information gap is a major finding and supports the view of 6 in 10 Americans (60%) that they simply do not know where to go if they were interested in getting more information about river protection and conservation.
- Nearly one in five Americans (18%) say the first or second most important reason they are not involved is simply that they were not aware of the gravity of the situation. This confirms the lack of awareness among Americans about the current state of the health of our nation’s rivers.

Americans Willing to Embrace Water-Wise Actions

Americans express a strong willingness to take certain everyday actions that have a positive impact on the health of our rivers. For example, Americans respond very positively to “water-wise” behaviors such as turning off the tap while brushing teeth or doing dishes (90%), running the washing machine or dishwasher only when full (85%) or watering lawns in the morning or evening (71%).

- Americans are less willing to embrace actions that are perceived to negatively impact their lifestyles or preferences, such as landscaping with native plants rather than grass (38%) and giving up the luxury of driving to work, even if it is only one day a week (22%).

Americans Willing to Take Action to Reduce Harmful Runoff

Americans also express a strong willingness to take action specifically to reduce harmful runoff into rivers, including engaging in activities that make their home safe for the river.

- Nearly half or more of Americans are very willing to sweep patios and sidewalks instead of hosing them (77%), use porous products for driveways and yards (60%), stabilize their soil so that bare dirt is not exposed (59%), minimize pavement on their properties (53%) and re-route gutters so rain does not go into the sewer system (46%);

“Water-Wise” Behaviors: Taking Actions to Protect and Conserve Rivers	Very Willing to Do
Fix any leaks promptly to stop oil and fluids from dripping	95
Be careful changing your oil so none leaks and dispose of it safely	95
Fix leaks right away	92
Turn off tap while brushing teeth or doing dishes	90
Run the washing machine or dishwasher only when full	85
Water lawns in the morning or evening when water evaporates slowly	71
Install low flow showerheads	68
Install low flush toilets	62
Take shorter showers	59
Wash your car on grass instead of the street	55
Landscape with native plants rather than grass	38
Walk or take public transportation once a week instead of driving	22

- There is also a strong willingness to embrace activities that make homes safer for rivers: disposing of household chemicals safely and not down the drain or sewer (83%), inspecting and repairing leaky sewers and septic tanks (81%), buying environmentally sound products (71%), minimizing use of fertilizers (57%), burying or flushing pet waste (55%), eliminating pesticide use (54%), and starting a compost pile (47%).

Strong Segment of Americans Willing to be River Advocates

What is encouraging about the poll result is that although Americans are less willing to involve themselves in hands-on activities that require more time and energy than simply being careful with water usage and stopping runoff, **NEARLY HALF ARE**. Additionally, between 1 in 4 and 1 in 5 Americans are willing to become “river-activists.”

- Half of Americans (50%) are very willing to go outside and become familiar with their watershed and closest river, and nearly half (45%) are willing to participate in or organize a river clean-up. Four in ten (40%) say they are very willing to stencil warnings on storm drains informing residents that they drain into rivers.
- One-quarter to one-third of Americans are very willing to become activists, and engage in such activities as talking to their neighbors about river protection and water quality (30%), supporting environmental groups with time or money (27%), and writing letters to newspapers about the importance of river conservation (22%). Additionally, 44% said they would let their political leaders know that they care about river conservation.

Americans are Motivated by the Desire to Protect Wildlife Habitat and Get Access to Clean Water

When asked what their strongest motivations were to protect and conserve rivers, Americans cited protecting fish and wildlife (19%) and ensuring that they had clean drinking water (14%).

- Nearly all Americans (93%) said that clean drinking water was a “very important motivation” and nearly 8 in 10 Americans (78%) said that protecting fish and wildlife was a very important motivation.
- Other reasons cited as “very important” motivators by more than half of Americans include protecting our national heritage (61%), maintaining the scenic beauty of rivers (57%), and keeping restored waterfronts in good condition (57%).

Strong Interest in a Conservation and Awareness Program that is “Family-Friendly”

Two-thirds of Americans (66%) said they would be very (22%) or somewhat interested (44%) in learning more about a conservation and awareness program designed to educate and excite people about rivers. Poll results clearly show that if Americans perceive that there are “family benefits” to such a program, then increasing the number of Americans who would be very interested is an achievable goal.

- Greater than 8 in 10 Americans (83%) say that such a program suited for both adults and children- not just adults (7%) or children (9%).
- Two-thirds of Americans (64%) and 71% of parents say getting children involved in river protection and conservation is a great educational experience and a good way for them to learn about values such as the impact we as people have on our environment and that those are convincing reasons to become involved in river protection efforts.

Clearly a family focus will increase participation of Americans in programs that protect and conserve our rivers.