

Top Environmental Concerns of the American Public: Selected Years, 1997-2008

Description

This table presents a time series of the top environmental concerns of the American people as determined from consistent long-term polling. The data are expressed as the percentage of respondents who worried about a particular environmental problem “a great deal.” For over a decade the Gallup polling organization has evaluated the perceptions, beliefs, and policy priorities of different public audiences on a wide range of issues. One of these is the environmental concerns of the average American. A series of consistent survey questions has been asked almost every year to elicit the environmental problems that Americans find most worrisome.

According to Gallup, the survey questions were presented as follows: “I’m going to read you a list of environmental problems. As I read each one, please tell me if you personally worry about this problem a great deal, a fair amount, only a little, or not at all. First, how much do you personally worry about — [problems presented in random order]?” The list of environmental problems read includes the following:

- Pollution of drinking water
- Pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs
- Contamination of soil and water by toxic waste
- Maintenance of nation’s supply of fresh water for household needs
- Loss of natural habitat for wildlife
- Air pollution
- Damage to Earth’s ozone layer
- Loss of tropical rain forests
- Extinction of plant and animal species
- Urban sprawl and loss of open space
- Greenhouse effect or global warming
- Acid rain

Consistently, the most serious concerns have been expressed about water-related problems, including pollution of drinking water, pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs, and maintenance of the nation’s supply of freshwater for household needs.

Around half of all respondents worries “a great deal” about each of these three problems.

Limitations

All polls have limitations. According to Gallup, the results of these polls are typically based on telephone interviews with a sample of around 1,000 national adults, aged 18 and older. This sampling approach produces results with a 95% confidence level and a margin of sampling error of ± 3 percentage points. They also note that in addition to sampling error, “question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.”

SOURCES

Saad, L. Global warming on public's back burner, Gallup Poll News Service, April 20, 2004.
<http://www.gallup.com/poll/content/?ci=11398&pg=1>; <http://www.gallup.com/tag/Environment.aspx>.

DATA TABLE 20 Top Environmental Concerns of the American Public: Selected Years, 1997–2008
(Percentage of People Who Worry About Issue “a great deal.”)

Issue	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2006	2007	2008
Pollution of drinking water	NA	68	72	64	57	54	53	54	58	53
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs	NA	61	66	58	53	51	48	52	53	50
Contamination of soil and water by toxic waste	NA	63	64	58	53	51	48	51	52	50
Maintenance of nation's supply of fresh water for household needs	NA	NA	42	35	50	49	47	49	51	48
Loss of natural habitat for wildlife										44
Air pollution	42	52	59	48	45	42	39	44	46	43
Damage to Earth's ozone layer	33	44	49	47	38	35	33	40	43	39
Loss of tropical rain forests	NA	49	51	44	38	39	35	40	43	40
Extinction of plant and animal species	NA	NA	45	43	35	34	36	34	39	37
Urban sprawl and loss of open space										33
Greenhouse effect or global warming	24	34	40	33	29	28	26	36	41	37
Acid rain	NA	29	34	28	25	24	20	24	25	23

NA = not available

