

June 2017

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Recommended Citation

Mason, Susan E. and Winkelman, James J. (2017) "Protecting the Environment: Awareness and Responsibility," *Journal of Vincentian Social Action*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://scholar.stjohns.edu/jovsa/vol2/iss1/6>

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Protecting the Environment: Awareness and Responsibility

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We first spoke about environmental awareness and responsibility at the Twenty-Third Annual International Vincentian Business Conference (Mason, Dyster, & Winkelman, 2016). As expected at a business ethics conference, participants did not debate whether businesses should consider their environmental impact. It was accepted that it is the right thing to do. More generally, public awareness of ethical issues related to the environment has been heightened in recent years. Contributing factors include the release of Pope Francis's environmental encyclical (Francis, 2015), the ratification of the Paris Agreement on Climate Change (United Nations, 2015), and the 2016 US presidential election for which candidates published position statements and debated the issues.

Our position is that protecting the environment is not only the right thing to do, it is the smart thing to do, in terms of both short-term and long-term business goals. Green businesses can realize immediate financial benefits from environmental sustainability and energy conservation, and there are branding benefits associated with developing and maintaining a reputation for integrity and social responsibility. Long-term benefits depend on having a true commitment, though, not on just being perceived as going green. Businesses that are more concerned with perception than reality are short-sighted, and they are likely to damage their brands and alienate their customers in the long run.

Certainly, if a business is to be successful, business managers must understand and respect the values held by the public. This is especially true for those members of the public who are stakeholders in the business. If customers, and members of the immediate and extended community consider environmental sustainability to be a priority, then a wise business will reflect similar values.

Though environmental issues are becoming increasingly more important to the public, there is wide

variation in the views held and the strength of those views. To better understand values related to the environment, we conducted an exploratory study of individual differences in environmental knowledge and attitudes. We hypothesized that factors such as gender, age, and political affiliation would be associated with differences in responses.

Methodology

Our sample, composed of university students and alumni, included 49 younger adults aged 18-30 and 54 older adults aged 47-82; 30 identified as male and 73 identified as female; 27 identified as Republican and 32 identified as Democrat; 64 identified as Catholic. Smaller numbers selected other political parties or religions, reported they did not affiliate with a political party or a religious group, or failed to answer the question. All participants first answered demographic questions and then responded to a ten-item questionnaire, which was a modified version of Simpson's (1998) environmental awareness questionnaire. Simpson's questionnaire was designed for use with secondary school students. Though the wording in most of the items is appropriate for adolescents and adults of all ages, the stem for one item (#9) required a re-writing for our purposes. We changed the question stem "By the time you are 30 years old, the environment will be," to "In 15 years, the environment will be."

Results

<i>Item</i>	<i>Question</i>	<i>Finding</i>
1	Our environment is: a. in good shape b. in some trouble but can be saved with a little effort c. in bad shape but a lot of effort might save it d. in such bad shape little can be done about it	For item #1, the most frequent response was option c, that our environment is in bad shape but a lot of effort might save it. Women responded more negatively than men about the shape of the environment.
2	Which of the following do you feel is the worst environmental problem facing the planet? a. ozone depletion b. toxic waste c. global warming d. water pollution e. air pollution f. deforestation	For item #2, the most frequent response was option c, that global warming is the worst environmental problem facing the planet. As compared to younger adults, older adults had a greater consensus on global warming as the worst problem.
3	Who are the worst polluters? a. industries b. governments c. individual people	For item #3, the most frequent response was option a, that industries are the worst polluters. As compared to Republicans, Democrats had a greater consensus on industry blame.
4	Who should be responsible for making sure we have a healthy environment? a. industry b. government c. environmental groups d. individuals	For item #4, the most frequent response was d, that individuals should be responsible for making sure we have a healthy environment. Compared to older adults, younger adults had a greater consensus on individual responsibility.
5	Is the current concern over the state of the environment justified? (Do you think it is really as bad as some people say it is?) a. yes b. no c. not sure	For item #5, the most frequent response was option a, that the current concern over the state of the environment is justified. Democrats had a greater consensus that concern is justified than did Republicans.
6	Given the current concern about the environment, how would you describe your future? a. bright and hopeful b. challenging c. depressing d. uncertain	For item #6, the most frequent response was option b, that the respondents saw their own future as challenging. Older men were more optimistic about the future than were women or younger men.
7	The single most important thing that will make sure the environment is healthy for future generations is if: a. the polluting industries shut down, even if people lose their jobs b. new technologies can be found to solve our problems c. people learn to live with less and be more efficient users of energy and materials d. we find a way to have economic development continue in a way that minimizes pollution	For item #7, the most frequent response was option d, that the single most important thing that will make sure the environment is healthy for future generations is if we find a way to have economic development continue in a way that minimizes pollution. Compared to women, men were more focused on new technologies. Compared with Democrats, Republicans had a greater consensus on the importance of economic development with less pollution.

8	I believe my health has already been affected by pollution. a. yes b. no c. maybe d. haven't thought about it	For item #8, the most frequent response was option c; respondents believe that their health may have already been affected by pollution. Younger adults were more negative about the health effects than were older adults.
9	In 15 years, the environment will be: a. destroyed b. better than it is now c. worse than it is now d. about the same as it is now	For item #9, the most frequent response was option c, that in 15 years the environment will be worse than it is now. Older men were more optimistic than younger adults or older women.
10	Sustainable development means: a. development that provides the most jobs b. development that will save the environment even if it means lots of people will lose their jobs c. development that takes into consideration the economic and environmental needs of future generations	For item #10, the most frequent response was option c, that sustainable development means development that takes into consideration the economic and environmental needs of future generations. Option c was selected by 90% of the respondents and there were no significant group differences.

Table 1 - Questionnaire items are presented individually with a description of the findings. Reported group differences had a Pearson Chi-square probability of less than .05.

Conclusions and Discussion

In conclusion, the study revealed gender, age, and political affiliation difference in environmental awareness. Women tended to have more negative views about the shape of the environment and its effects on their futures. This was especially true compared to older men, who tended to be more optimistic. Men in both age groups were more likely than women to believe that new technologies can be found to solve our problems.

Both age groups saw global warming as the worst environmental problem, but older adults focused on global warming to a greater extent than did younger adults. Age group differences also revealed that younger adults were more likely to feel that their health may have been negatively affected by pollution, and that individuals have the greatest responsibility for making sure we have a healthy environment.

Compared to Republicans, Democrats were more likely to think that concern is justified and that industry is to blame for pollution. Republicans were more likely than Democrats to champion continued economic development while minimizing pollution.

Factors such as religion, race, ethnicity, education level, geographic region, and socio-economic status may also be predictive of environmental awareness and attitudes. However, our sample lacked the diversity necessary for such an analysis. We recommend further research on demographic characteristics and individual differences in attitudes about environmental issues. With a greater understanding of those differences, responsive businesses would be in a better position to do what is good for the planet and good for business.

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