

Being Green: Attitudes to the Environment

Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd

Introduction

Every year people living in Northern Ireland throw away enough waste to cover the whole country. Most of this waste ends up in landfills, which are costly, unsightly and may have major impacts on the environment and on the health of the population.

Saving the environment in Northern Ireland has become a big issue in recent months. The Wake up to Waste advertising campaign is attempting to change both the attitudes and the behaviour of the public in Northern Ireland towards waste. The message being promoted is 'the three R's': Reduce, Re-use and Recycle.

In October 2002, the then Environment Minister Dermot Nesbitt launched an initiative to cut down on the 230 million plastic bags that are used in Northern Ireland each year. These campaigns rely on persuasion. In contrast, earlier in 2002, the Irish government introduced a tax of 15 cent per plastic bag used by consumers. This policy has dramatically cut the amount of plastic bags issued to consumers, thus reducing both the demand on resources needed to manufacture the bags and the amount of litter caused by discarded bags, as well as raising millions of euro for the Irish government.

Much of Northern Ireland's waste policy and guidance is based on European Union (EU) legislation which gives strong direction on waste issues to its member states. Forthcoming EU directives will include the control of waste electrical and electronic equipment, batteries, waste oils, household hazardous waste and composting.

Media attention has also focused on more global environmental issues such as climate change, which were highlighted in the world climate summits held in Kyoto and, more recently, in New Dehli. At a national level, the increasing incidence of severe floods across the UK has been attributed to climate change by many commentators.

In the light of this increased media attention and the attempts of campaigns such as Wake up to Waste to heighten public awareness of environmental issues, this update uses findings from the **2000 Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** to gauge how receptive the people of Northern Ireland may be to changing their behaviour, as well as their attitudes, towards the environment.

Changes in attitudes to the environment

Over the years, research in Northern Ireland has shown that people here are becoming more aware of, and more concerned about, environmental issues such as the greenhouse effect and nuclear power stations (Stringer, 1992, Yearly, 1995). For example in 1992, 56% of people interviewed for the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey said they were very concerned about the risks from nuclear power, while in the 1995 Survey, 61% of respondents said that nuclear power stations were 'very or extra dangerous'.

However, while research has indicated more concern in Northern Ireland about environmental issues, there has been little change over the years in the number of people who translate these



steps to alter their actual behaviour. For example in 1992, 21% of people interviewed for the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey said that they regularly returned waste for recycling, while in the 1995 Survey only 24% said they always or often made a special effort to recycle. So what is the situation in Northern Ireland 5 years on?

Perceived threats to the environment

Looking first at attitudes to environmental issues, respondents to the 2000 *Life and Times Survey* were asked a series of questions relating to possible threats to the environment and how dangerous they thought they were. As Table 1 shows, there is fairly widespread concern about the level of danger to the environment. In particular, two thirds of respondents (65%) thought that air pollution from industry was extremely or very dangerous.

Table 1: Threats to the environment

	% saying extremely or very dangerous
Air pollution from industry	65
Pesticides and chemicals	61
Pollution of waterways	52
Nuclear power stations	59
Greenhouse effect	58
Air pollution from cars	48
Genetic modification of crops	44

Who pays?

So, to what extent does this concern translate into behaviours that may have an impact on the environment? In order to find out what people say they would be prepared to do, respondents were asked about three different hypothetical scenarios, each with personal and financial implications.

It can be seen from Table 2 that, even hypothetically, far fewer people would be prepared to accept things which might affect them personally but would have a positive effect on the environment than had shown concern for the environment. Indeed, only 12% of respondents said they would be willing to accept all three scenarios.

In contrast, respondents to the 2000 British Social Attitudes (BSA) Survey indicate a greater willingness to pay higher prices, higher taxes and accept cuts in living standards. For example, 43% of these respondents would be prepared to pay much higher prices to protect the environment, compared to 29% in Northern Ireland.


Table 2: Willingness to make financial sacrifices to protect the environment

	% saying very or fairly willing	
	N Ireland	Britain
Pay much higher prices	29	43
Pay much higher taxes	20	31
Accept cuts in living standard	17	26

Environmental behaviours

While people in Northern Ireland seem unwilling to protect the environment if it affects their pockets, how 'green' are they when it comes to actual behaviours that may cause some inconvenience but do not cost much in monetary terms? As Table 3 shows, just over one third of respondents say they have cut back on their driving (always, often or sometimes) for the sake of the environment, while around two thirds sort glass, tins, plastic or newspaper for recycling. However, the percentages of Northern Irish people carrying out these behaviours 'always' or 'often' are lower than comparable figures for Britain where 51% claim to recycle and 14% cut back on driving 'always' or 'often'.

Table 3: Environmental Behaviour

	Always	Often	Some-times	Never
	%	%	%	%
Recycle*	13	19	36	32
Cut back on driving**	2	9	28	61

* figures exclude respondents who say recycling facilities are not available

** figures exclude respondents who can't drive

Who recycles?

What factors differentiate 'green' from 'non-green' people? People in higher social class categories and those who have higher educational qualifications are much more likely

to recycle. In spite of the widespread advertising campaigns aimed at parents through their schoolchildren, one interesting finding to emerge is that people who have children under the age of 16 years are not more likely to recycle than those who do not have school age children. Surprisingly, younger people are less likely to recycle than older people - over half of all people aged between 18 and 24 say they never recycle. It may be that environmental campaigners should make a special effort to target this age group.

Respondents were also asked if they had supported the environmental cause during the last five years by participating in three different activities. As Table 4 shows, the level of activism was low. Less than one in five respondents had signed a petition about an environmental issue, less than one in six had given money to an environmental group and only one in fifty had taken part in a protest or demonstration.

Table 4: Practical support for environmental causes

	% saying yes
Signed a petition about an environmental issue	18
Given money to an environmental group	15
Taken part in a protest or demonstration about an environmental issue	2

Mediating factors

It would appear from the findings presented above that the attitudes of people in Northern Ireland towards the environment are poor predictors of their actual 'green' behaviours. However, when examining the link between attitudes and behaviour, account must be taken of factors that can mediate to prevent the

translation of attitudes into behaviours. For instance, people cannot recycle their household goods unless accessible facilities are provided that make this possible.

In addition, people who do not recycle may have different perceptions about the usefulness of taking action to protect the environment than those who do recycle. Findings from the 2000 Life and Times Survey suggest that people who do not engage in environmentally friendly behaviours are much more likely to believe that there is no point in them doing anything if others do not. So, while 63% of people who never recycle agree that there is no point in them doing what they can for the environment when others do not, 32% of people who always recycle agree with the same statement. Likewise, 60% of 'recyclers' disagree that it is too difficult to do much about the environment compared with only 28% of the non-recyclers. Unsurprisingly, almost two-thirds (63%) of those who always recycle compared to just 20% of those who never recycle say they do what is right for the environment even when it costs more money or takes more time.

Protecting the environment

So who do respondents think does more to protect the environment, and who should actually be doing this? When asked if people in general, or business and industry are making more effort to look after the environment, 41% of respondents chose the former, compared to 12% who chose the latter. Similarly, people in general were thought to be making more effort than government (31% and 19% respectively). Thirdly, when asked to choose between business/industry and government, business and industry



came a poor second (11% as against 30%). Thus overall, these figures indicate that respondents feel that the general public and government do more to protect the environment than business and industry.

The vast majority of Northern Ireland environmental legislation is as a result of EU Directives. However, who do respondents feel should have control over creating environmental legislation? In order to gauge support for global legislation, respondents were asked how much they agreed or disagreed that there should be international agreements that Northern Ireland and other countries should be made to follow in order to control environmental problems. More than three quarters of respondents (78%) showed some level of support for this idea.

When asked how well Northern Ireland is doing to protect the world environment, two fifths of respondents (41%) thought that Northern Ireland was doing too little - see Table 5. In contrast, only 2% of respondents thought that it was doing more than enough. However, 27% of respondents were undecided.

Table 5: Northern Ireland's protection of the environment

	%
More than enough	2
About right	29
Too little	41
Can't choose	27

Given that respondents thought that Northern Ireland was doing too little to protect the environment, it is not surprising that there was support for tougher environmental legislation. As shown in Table 6, when given the choice of two options, nearly one half (47%) of respondents thought that government should pass laws to make ordinary people protect the environment.

Table 6: Support for tighter environmental laws for ordinary people

	%
Government should pass laws to make ordinary people protect the environment, even if it interferes with people's rights to make their own decisions.	47
Government should let ordinary people decide for themselves how to protect the environment, even if it means they don't always do the right thing	23
Can't choose	27

When related to business, respondents were even more draconian: over two thirds (69%) thought that government should pass laws to make businesses protect the environment (see Table 7).

Table 7: Support for tighter environmental laws for businesses

	%
Government should pass laws to make business protect the environment, even if it interferes with people's rights to make their own decisions.	69
Government should let business decide for themselves how to protect the environment, even if it means they don't always do the right thing	8
Can't choose	22

Conclusions

While Northern Irish respondents seem concerned about threats to the environment, they are undecided as to what should be done about them. Few would be prepared to pay higher taxes or prices, and the level of environmentally positive behaviour is low, especially in comparison to Britain. Perhaps there is a sense of it being some one else's problem, especially given that Northern Ireland as a whole is seen as not doing enough to protect the environment.

There is widespread support for tougher legislation, especially in relation to business and industry that are seen as doing least to protect the environment. The overall message, however, is that the public of Northern Ireland is not environmentally active. This is a message that both government agencies and environmental pressure groups should take on board.

The 2000 Life and Times Survey involved face to face interviews with a random and representative sample of 1800 adults in their own homes. Figures do not always add up to 100 because of rounding.

Paula Devine and Katrina Lloyd are Research Directors of ARK, based at the Institute of Governance, Public Policy and Social Research, Queen's University Belfast.

References

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Aberfoyle House
Magee Campus
University of Ulster
Northland Road
Londonderry BT48 7JA

Tel: 028 7137 5513
Fax: 028 7137 5510
E-mail: dm.hughes@ulster.ac.uk

Institute of Governance
Public Policy and Social Research
Queen's University Belfast
Belfast
BT7 1NN

Tel: 028 9027 3034
Fax: 028 9027 2551
E-mail: dm.hughes@ulster.ac.uk

Key Points

- There is widespread concern about threats to the environment, especially from air pollution, pesticides and chemicals.
- Fewer respondents in Northern Ireland than in Britain would be prepared to pay higher prices or taxes, or to accept cuts in living standards, to protect the environment.
- One third of respondents never recycle, and 61% never cut back on driving.
- Business and industry are seen as poor protectors of the environment.
- Northern Ireland is seen as not doing enough to protect the environment.
- There is strong support for tougher legislation to force everyone, but especially businesses, to protect the environment.

The **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey** is carried out annually and documents public opinion on a wide range of social issues. In 2000, 1800 adults were interviewed on the main survey and 259 young people on the accompanying Young Life and Times Survey. Interviews were carried out by Research and Evaluation Services.

The **Life and Times Survey** is a joint project of the two Northern Ireland universities and aims to provide an independent source of information on what the public thinks about the social issues of the day. Check the web site for more information on the survey findings (www.ark.ac.uk/nilt) or call the survey directors on 028 9027 3034 with any queries.

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