

Environment Group

Valuing the Water Environment: A Survey of Scottish Public Attitudes

Ipsos MORI

To inform implementation of the Water Framework Directive, the Scottish Executive commissioned a module of questions in the April/May 2006 wave of Ipsos MORI's Scottish Social Policy Monitor, a multi-client, face-to-face survey carried out with a random sample of adults across Scotland. This survey involved interviews with 1,011 adults. It focused on attitudes towards the water environment in Scotland; how people use the water environment; perceptions of quality; and public understanding of the threats to, as well as future expectations for, the water environment.¹

Main findings

- Reducing our contribution to climate change and global warming, addressing our energy needs, and increasing recycling levels were considered the three most important out of eight environmental issues about which respondents were asked. Ensuring that the water in our rivers and lochs is of a high quality was ranked fourth equal in terms of importance alongside reducing the amount of waste sent to landfill, while reducing the risk of flooding was rated the least important of the issues which were asked about.
- The public are significantly less concerned about saving water than about recycling or using less energy, suggesting they may be less concerned about their own behaviours, or may be less aware of the impacts of these, in relation to the water environment than to other environmental issues.
- The water environment was considered important to people's quality of life, with around half of respondents saying that it is very important, and around a third saying it is quite important. Drinking water and health were the two most common reasons given for why it is important.
- People's perception of the quality of the water environment in Scotland was generally positive, three-quarters saying that, overall, they consider it to be very good or quite good. Around 70% said that the water environment *in their local area* was either very good or quite good.
- The highest priority for water environment improvements was the quality of coastal waters near urban areas, followed by action to avoid the risk of flooding and to avoid damage to wildlife habitats.
- Pollution and sewage were seen as the biggest threats to the water environment.
- Most expect the local water environment to stay much the same in the next five years or so. Slightly more people expected it to get better than expected it to deteriorate. Although a majority do not consider serious water shortages likely in the next few years, over a quarter said that they were likely. The most common reason for this view was climate change/global warming.

¹ The full report from this survey is available at:
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/Research/17692/SocialResearchPubs/Introduction>

Introduction

The EC Water Framework Directive 2000 (WFD) sets out a new framework for managing the water environment.² It is implemented in Scotland by the Water Environment and Water Services (Scotland) Act 2003, which establishes a strategic source-to-sea planning framework for river basin management, with the aims of preventing deterioration of water bodies and striving to restore all waters to 'good' ecological status by 2015, where possible. The WFD is one of the first European regulations to demand a high degree of public stakeholder involvement in its implementation. It is within this context that the Scottish Executive commissioned a module of questions in the 2006 April/May wave of Ipsos MORI's Scottish Social Policy Monitor (SPM).

The SPM is a face-to-face survey carried out, in-home, among a random sample of around 1,000 adults. Results are weighted to ensure that they are representative of the Scottish population. It should be noted that the spring fieldwork period was before a relatively dry summer, and prior to much of the media attention regarding the water environment in England and in continental Europe.

Water in the context of wider environmental views

Respondents were asked to rate the relative importance of eight environmental issues facing Scotland.

Reducing our contribution to climate change/global warming (55%), addressing how to meet our energy needs (46%), and increasing levels of recycling were considered the three most important issues (46%). In comparison, 38% rated ensuring the water in our rivers and lochs is of a high quality in their top three in terms of importance, while just 11% listed reducing the risk of flooding in their three highest priority issues.

Older people significantly placed a higher priority on ensuring the quality of water in rivers and lochs than young people.

Respondents were asked about four possible actions they might take to help protect the environment in terms of how much they performed, whether they had thought about and whether they were able to undertake those behaviours. The least common action was using less water in one's home, with 21% saying they did this 'a lot'. In comparison, 63% said they recycle household waste a lot; 39% said they walk,

cycle or use public transport rather than a car a lot; and 29% said that they use less electricity or gas in their home a lot.

These results suggest that people may be less concerned about their own behaviours in relation to the water environment than their actions in relation to other environmental issues. This may be because of a number of possible factors, such as they do not view water quality or supply as problematic, are not aware of the energy costs in providing domestic water supply, or are more aware of the environmental benefits of the other actions asked about.

Is it important?

Although people are less concerned about the water environment than some other environmental issues, 86% said that their *local* water environment (excluding drinking water and household supply) was important to their personal quality of life. Older people were more likely than young people to say that it was important, and people living in small towns were more likely than those living in large urban areas, other urban areas, or rural areas to say likewise.

Drinking water and health were the two most commonly given reasons as to why the water environment is important. These were mentioned by around half of all respondents (51% and 47% respectively). Nature and wildlife was the third most commonly mentioned aspect, cited by 26%. Other than tourism and the fishing industry (both 16%), few mentioned other economic reasons such as farming/ agriculture (8%), food and drink production (7%) business/industry (3%) or the economy (3%).

Leisure and recreation

Respondents were asked about the frequency that they use the water environment for leisure and recreation purposes. Around three-quarters of people visit the water environment at least once a year to 'walk beside it' (78%) or to 'sit and look out at a body of water' (75%). Those aged between 35 and 64 were the most likely to participate in these activities, while those aged 65 and over were the least likely. Not surprisingly, those in rural areas were more likely to participate in these forms of recreation than those in large urban areas, other urban areas and small towns. There was no significant difference by sex.

Fewer people swim or undertake sports where one is in the water (38%), fish (12%), or go boating sailing or canoeing

² <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Environment/Water/17316/9088>

(13%) at least once a year. People living in rural areas more frequently fish and go boating, sailing and canoeing than those living in the other area types.

Perceptions of quality

People's perception of the quality of the water environment in Scotland is generally very positive. Three-quarters said that the water environment in Scotland *overall* is either very good or quite good. Only 6% said that it was quite poor or very poor. Similarly, 71% said that the quality *in their local area* was either very good or quite good.

The quality of the water environment was commonly considered better in rural areas than in urban areas. The quality of lochs, rivers and streams was also viewed more positively than the quality of coastal waters.

Priorities for improvement

Respondents were asked about nine aspects of provision and infrastructure in relation to the water environment and whether they should be improved or maintained at their current level. These were ranked by comparing the proportion who said that standards should be maintained to the proportion who said that *a lot of improvement* is needed.

The highest priority for improvement was the quality of coastal water near urban areas, followed by avoiding the risk of flooding, and avoiding damage to wildlife habitats caused by engineering works like altering river banks or loch beds.

The lowest priorities for improvement were ensuring a reliable water supply for homes, the quality of water in lochs, rivers and streams in rural areas, and in ensuring a reliable water supply for industry.

Perceived threats

Pollution and sewage are seen as the biggest threats to the water environment in Scotland. Overall, 81% thought that pollution by the general public was either a large problem or something of a problem; 73% said likewise about industrial pollution, and 65% said likewise about pollution from farming. Sewage was also considered a large problem or something of a problem by the majority of respondents (63%).

Fewer than four in ten people said that the other potential threats were a large problem or something of a problem.

Overall, 38% considered water extraction for industry as a problem, 26% thought likewise about extraction for domestic supply, while 24% said extraction for agriculture/irrigation was a problem.

With regard to various forms of engineering works, 38% said constructing flood defences was a large problem or something of a problem, and 31% said likewise about strengthening river banks; figures for constructing dams and river straightening were 25% and 21%, respectively. Fewer people offered an opinion as to the potential threat from various forms of engineering works than other potential threats to the water environment, perhaps a reflection of people's awareness and knowledge of the different types of threat.

Perceptions of the future

Most people (72%) expect the water environment in their area to stay much the same. More people said that they expect the water environment to get better (16%) than said that it would get worse (9%).

Men were more optimistic than women about the future of the water environment, while older people were more likely to express positive views than young people.

Increasing awareness/concern and stricter enforcement/new laws were the two most common reasons given as to why improvements are likely. Climate change/global warming, more pollution, and increases in population were the three most common reasons given as to why deterioration is likely.

The majority of people do not consider serious water shortages likely in Scotland in the next few years, with 31% saying that this was very unlikely and 27% saying that it was quite unlikely. However, given Scotland's image as a 'water-rich' country, that has never before suffered from serious water shortages, it could be considered surprising that as many as 28% of respondents to the survey did think that these are likely in the future.

Summary and implications

The public think that the water environment is important, is generally of good quality, and, indeed, that it is likely to stay that way. While awareness of certain environmental issues has been rising over recent years, a considerable lack of knowledge and deep understanding still exists with regard to

the water environment. The issues are more complex than simply ensuring that supply meets demand. Furthermore, the findings suggest that people's awareness of and sensitivity to issues of both quality and quantity need to be better understood and addressed if the public are to be effectively engaged in the long-term management of the water environment and resources at local and national level.

There clearly remains a challenge to engage with the general public in its management to encourage sustainable use of our water resources. This may involve action to:

- inform the public as to the need for stricter controls on water use
- persuade the public of the necessity for investment in quality-improvement measures
- emphasise the need to conserve water and provide information as to the public's role in this
- raise awareness of the indirect environmental impacts of ensuring water supplies – for example, the energy used in water processing

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The report, "Valuing the Water Environment: A Survey of Scottish Public Attitudes", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Executive website at www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/Recent

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