

**Future Environmental Priorities in North America**  
A summary of responses to a questionnaire

North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation

**November 2000**

## Introduction

What kind of environment will our children inherit 20 years from now? Will the quality of North America's environment—of our shared air, water, marine resources and precious species of animals and plants—be better or worse? Will the decisions, priorities and actions we take today ensure that our environmental future will be secure?

Over the past year the North American Commission for Environmental Cooperation (NACEC), through its Emerging Environmental Trends project, has been taking a closer look at “environmental futures.” In doing so, it has brought together leading experts, state-of-the-art models, robust data and other elements in an effort to gain insight into what North America's environment will look like in 2020.

Although a lot of work is being devoted to environmental forecasting and futures, the CEC has already learned that no one can predict the future. But by taking a long-term view of the consequences of today's decisions we can better understand their impacts on tomorrow's environment.

Our shared environmental future depends on the input of concerned groups and individuals. It also requires thinking about environmental policies in a different way. Over the past three decades, most environmental policies have been reactive--that is, they have taken shape in response to established environmental problems as opposed to anticipating and addressing environmental concerns before they become serious.

The purpose of the questionnaire on future environmental priorities was to seek public input on the issues that warrant attention today, as well as the public's vision of what the North American environment will look like 20 years from now. Please note, however, that the questionnaire was informal and that its respondents do not represent a random sampling of the population.

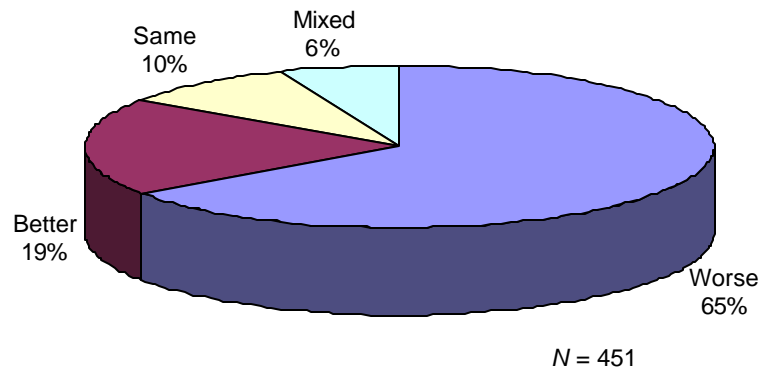
Approximately 475 persons responded to the questionnaire, although this number varied slightly question by question. The majority of respondents were anglophone, 51 were Spanish-speaking, and 13 were francophone. Pie and bar charts show the pooled response for all respondents. Any differences among the language groups are reported in the text.

## Question 1

*Twenty years from now, do you think the overall state of the environment in North America will be better than it is today, about the same, or worse? Why?*

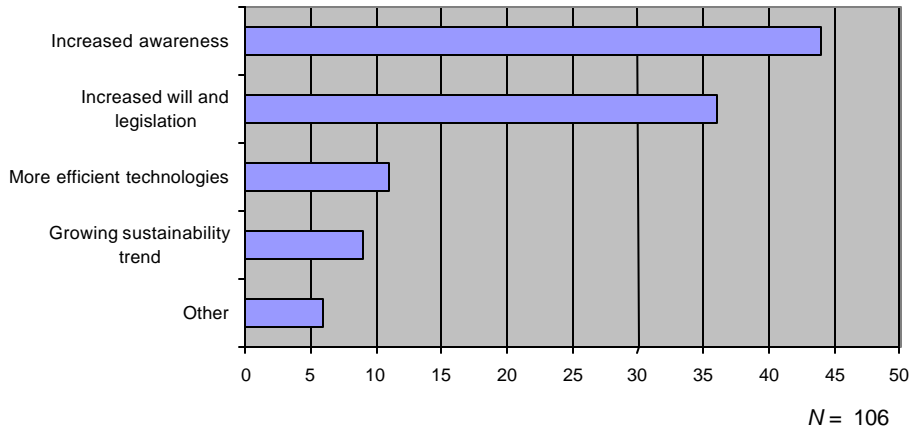
Overall, respondents were somewhat pessimistic about the state of the environment in North America in 20 years (see pie chart). Almost two-thirds of respondents thought the environment would be in a worse state than it is today, and only 19 percent thought that it would be better. Because the vast majority of respondents were anglophone, these proportions are representative of their responses, but disparities were found for the other two language groups. Only 46 percent of francophone respondents thought the environment would be in a worse state, and 38 percent believed that conditions would improve. By contrast, only 10 percent of Spanish-speaking respondents believed the environment would improve, 56 percent thought it would worsen, and a greater proportion than in the other groups thought it would remain the same or mixed--that is, some aspects would improve while others would worsen).

**State of the North American environment in 20 years**

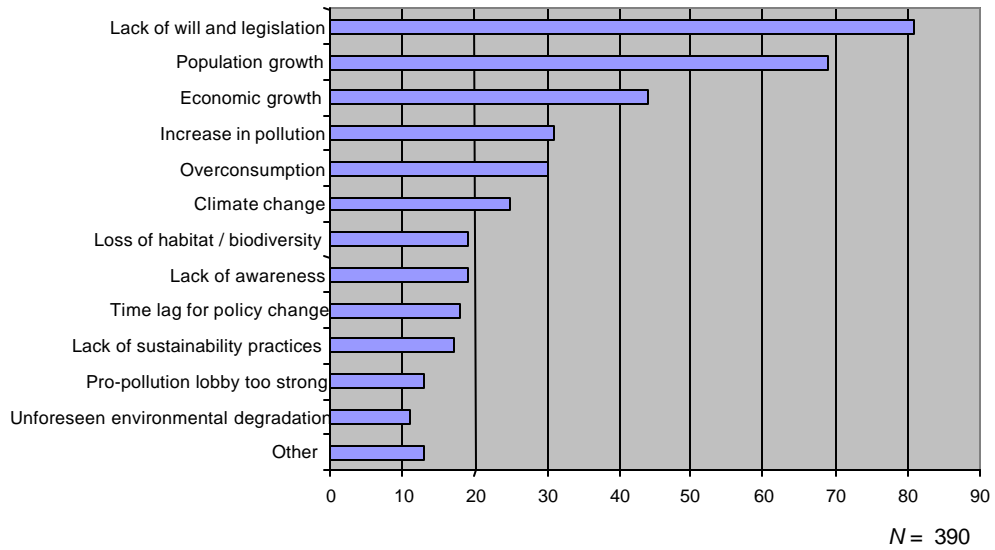


The reasons respondents gave for their choice between a better or worse state of the environment are depicted in the bar charts below. The most popular reason respondents gave for a worsened environment was a lack of will and legislation. Conversely, increased will and legislation was the second most important reason given by those who foresaw a better environment. It seems, then, that respondents' predictions of improving or worsening environmental conditions hinged in part on whether or not they believed leaders and the general public would have the sufficient will to institute the legislative changes needed for a better environment.

### Reasons for a better environment in 20 years



### Reasons for a worse environment in 20 years

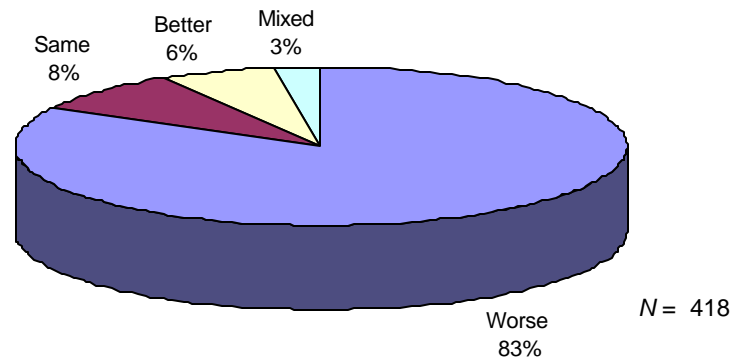


## Question 2

*How about the global environment, including global commons such as the atmosphere and oceans, and the situation in other countries around the world? Ten years from now, do you think the overall state of the global environment will be better than it is today, about the same, or worse? Why?*

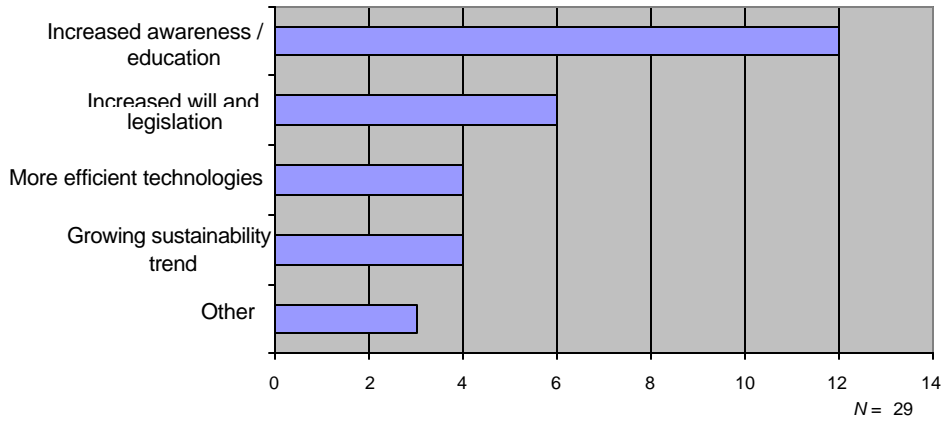
When asked about the state of the global environment in only 10 years, respondents had a more despairing view. Eighty-three percent of those who answered this question thought that environmental conditions in the global commons and in other countries would worsen. This view was shared by both anglophone and francophone respondents, but only 58 percent of Spanish-speaking respondents thought the global environment would be worse off, and none thought it would be better. The remaining 42 percent believed that conditions would stay the same or would be mixed.

**State of the global environment in 10 years**

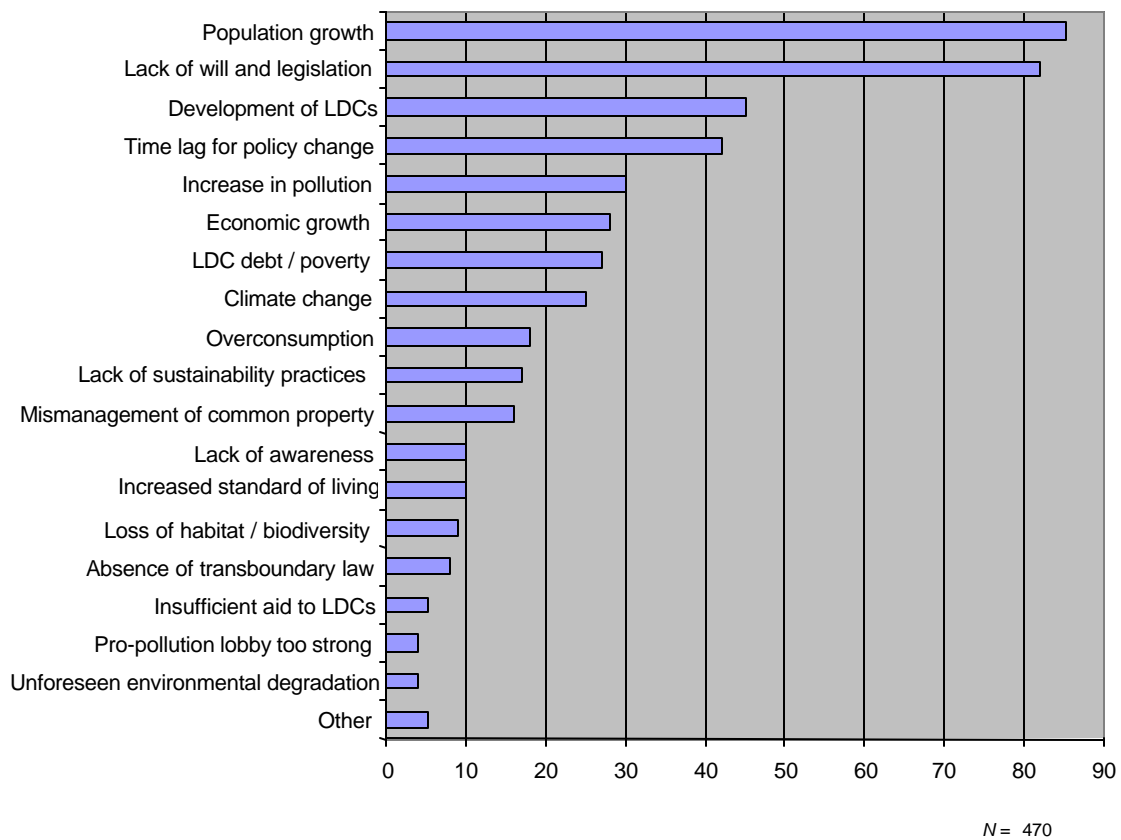


The reasons given by the minority who thought the global environment would be better are virtually identical to those offered in question 1. But the picture changed somewhat when respondents were asked why conditions would be worse. Population growth was cited as the number one reason for a worse environmental state. Furthermore, some new reasons emerged in response to this question involving the development of the less-developed countries (LDCs), their debt load and poverty, and the lack of transfers of wealth by the developed countries. Moreover, the category “time lag for policy change” moved up in importance from the previous question, reflecting the shortened time span of 10 years in question 2.

### Reasons for a better global environment in 10 years



### Reasons for a worse global environment in 10 years

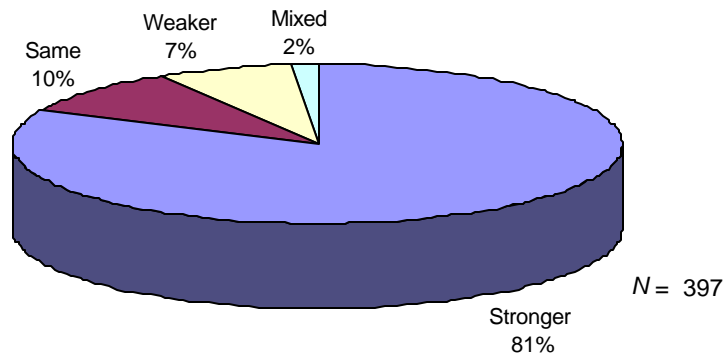


### Question 3

*Twenty years from now, do you think the public's commitment to environmental values and environmental protection is likely to be stronger than it is today, about the same, or weaker? Why?*

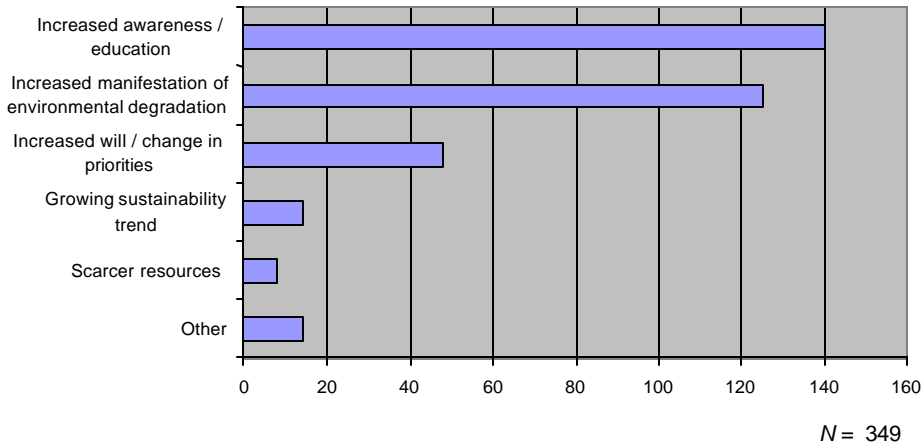
On the positive side, respondents firmly believed that the public's commitment to environmental values and protection would be stronger in the years to come. This view was shared to the same degree by all three language groups.

**Change in public's commitment to environment in 20 years**

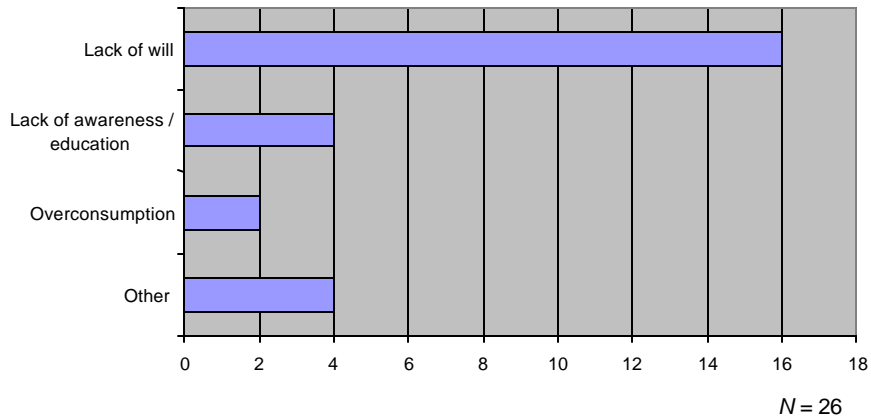


The few respondents who thought the public's commitment would be weaker in 20 years attributed that possibility mostly to a lack of will. In other words, the public would not be any more concerned about environmental issues in the future than it is today. By contrast, an overwhelming proportion of respondents believed that public commitment would be stronger mainly because of increased awareness of and education on environmental issues, as well as the greater manifestation of environmental degradation likely. The general consensus was that as time moved on and people put more and more stress on the environment, the degradation of ecosystems would become more evident, provoking heightened awareness of the problem and a stronger public commitment to resolving it.

### Reasons for a stronger public commitment in 20 years



### Reasons for a weaker public commitment in 20 years



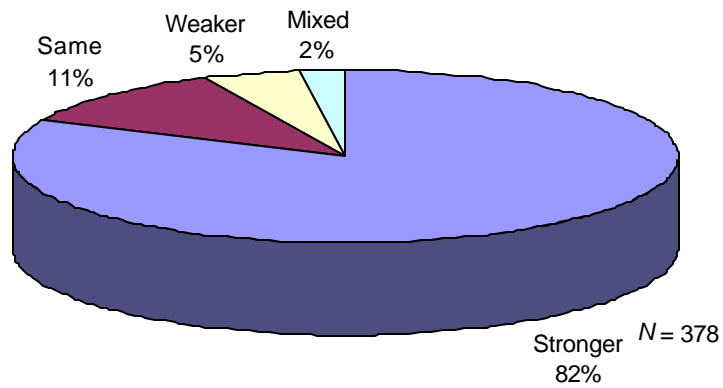
## Question 4

*Twenty years from now, do you think public support for and approval of environmental protection will be stronger than it is today, about the same, or weaker? Why?*

The responses to question 4 were virtually identical to those to question 3. Again, over 80 percent of respondents believed that public support for environmental protection would be stronger in 20 years.



### Change in public support for environment in 20 years



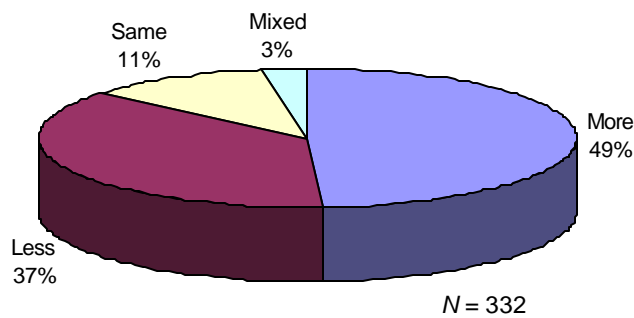
The most important reason for stronger support, however, was an increased manifestation of environmental degradation; increased awareness came in second. Furthermore, a small number of respondents believed that by 2020 climate change would have a negative impact on the environment as a whole and would thus solidify public support for environmental protection.

## Question 5

*Twenty years from now, are governments likely to emphasize voluntary compliance to attain environmental targets more than they do today, about the same as today, or less than today? Why?*

Overall, respondents were split on this question. Forty-nine percent thought greater emphasis would be placed on voluntary compliance; 37 percent believed there would be less reliance on voluntary compliance. The percentages for more emphasis on voluntary compliance were generally the same for both the anglophone and francophone respondents at 44 percent, whereas 85 percent of Spanish-speaking respondents believed that a much greater emphasis would be placed on voluntary compliance.

### How will governments emphasize voluntary compliance in 20 years ?

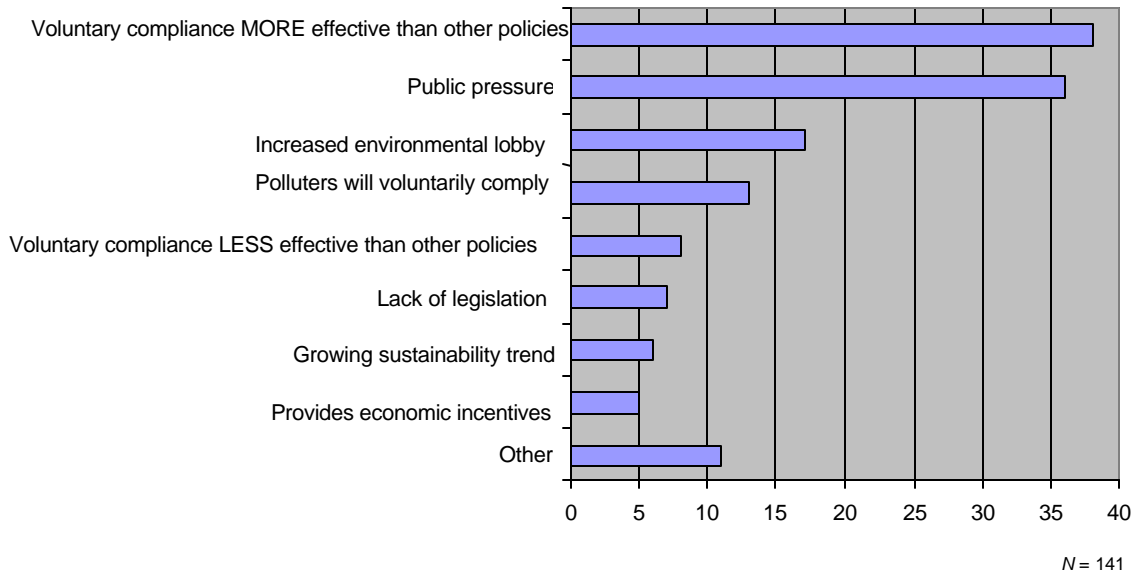


The choice between more or less emphasis on voluntary compliance for all language groups hinged primarily on whether this policy was viewed as effective. The two most prominent reasons given for choosing greater emphasis on voluntary compliance in 20 years were that, first, such an approach would have a greater effectiveness in achieving environmental targets and, second, there would be public pressure to set those targets. Conversely, the two main reasons for less emphasis on this approach were that it would be less effective than other policies and that governments would prefer firm legislation.

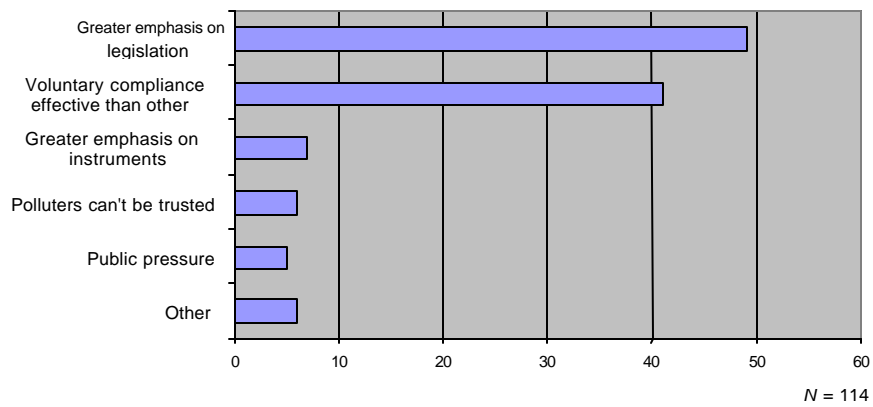
Another interesting facet of this question is that two of the reasons given for more emphasis on voluntary compliance were that this policy would be both *more* and *less* effective than others (see bar chart). The reasoning behind the former category is self evident, but the reasons why some respondents believed that governments would emphasize voluntary compliance more when that policy was deemed less effective are somewhat more sinister. Governments could employ voluntary compliance measures more in the future to appease the growing public pressure to protect the environment

without facing the risk of alienating the polluters, who would not be legally bound to comply.

### Reasons for more emphasis on voluntary compliance in 20 years



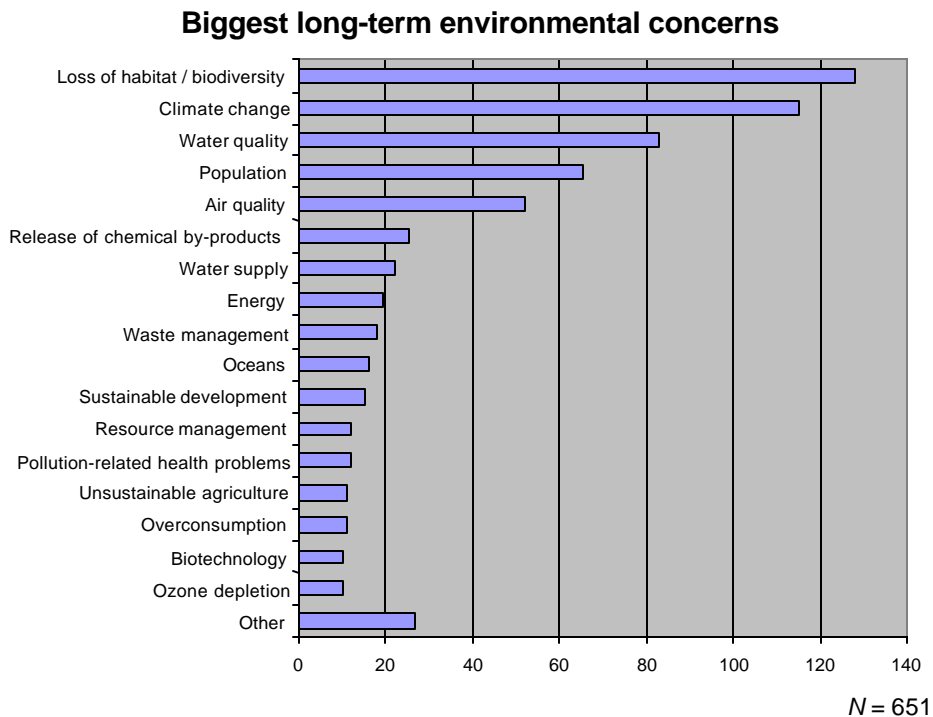
### Reasons for less emphasis on voluntary compliance in 20 years



## Question 6

*What are the two biggest long-term environmental concerns for you, and how has the nature of the most pressing environmental problems changed since you began following environmental issues?*

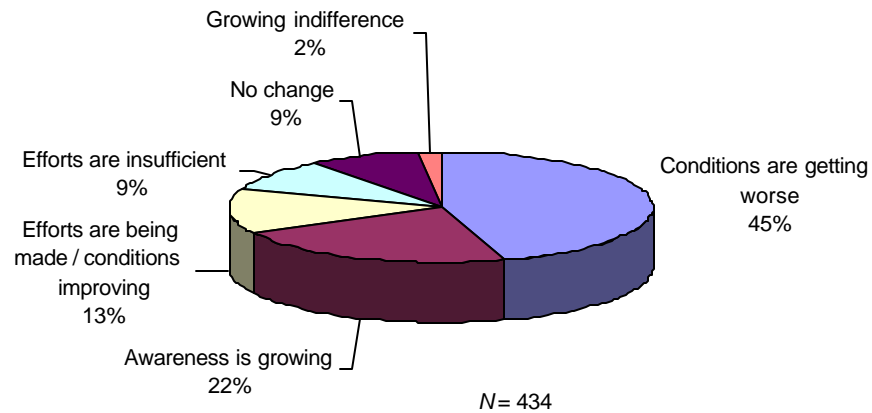
The two biggest long-term environmental concerns expressed by respondents were compiled into the 18 categories that appear in the bar chart below. The dominant concerns were: loss of habitat and biodiversity, climate change, water and air quality, and population growth.



When asked how the nature of the most pressing environmental problems would change, 45 percent of respondents said conditions would get worse, but 22 percent believed that awareness of these issues is growing which will inevitably lead to improved conditions later on.

Among language groups there were some differences in the priority of concerns, which may reflect how respondents are personally affected. The concerns of anglophones and francophones were largely the same as the overall concerns, except that climate change and ozone depletion were viewed as more important by francophones and population growth did not seem to be at all important. For Spanish-speaking respondents, the foremost concern was water quality, an indicator of environmental concerns held locally. Furthermore, a greater proportion of this language group believed that awareness of these concerns is growing but that efforts to improve conditions are still insufficient.

## Changes in pressing environmental problems

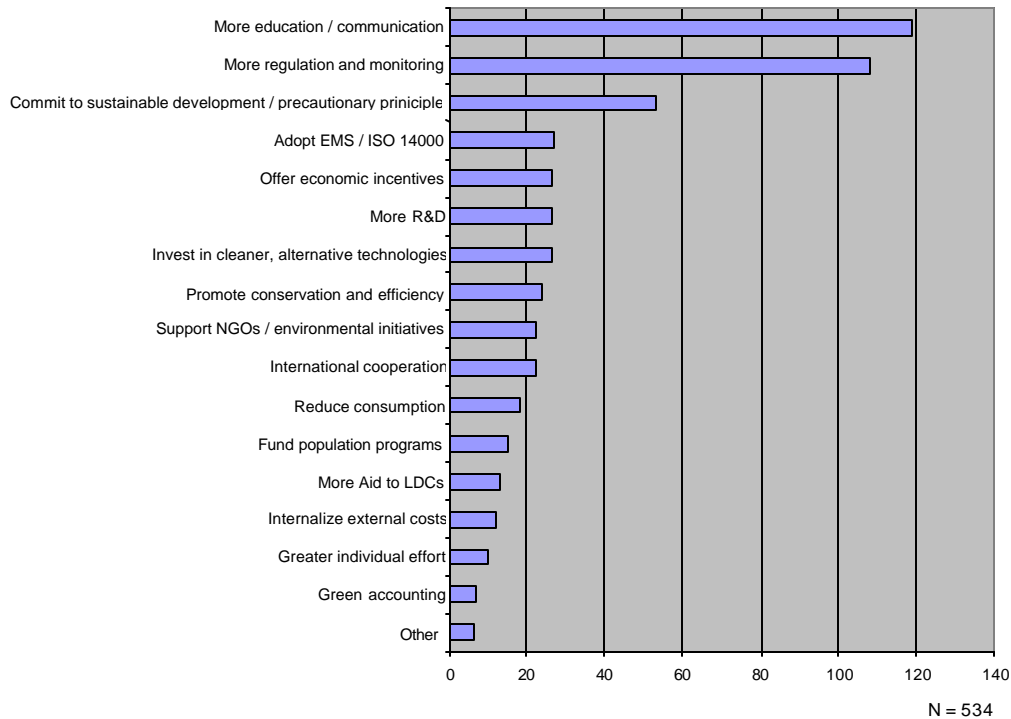


### Question 7

*What do you think needs to be done differently to better address these two concerns?*

Overall, respondents agreed on the two most important initiatives for better addressing environmental concerns: better education on environmental issues and better communication between the public and decisionmakers, together with more regulation and monitoring. The one resounding feature of this question is that all language groups concurred that these two initiatives are the most important when addressing environmental concerns.

### What needs to be done?



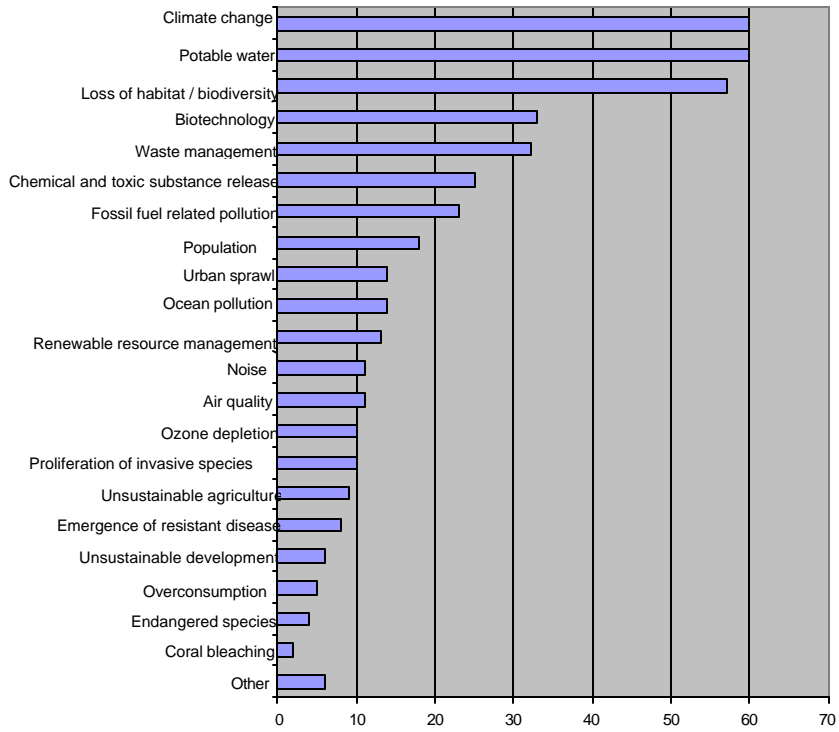
### Question 8

*Are there some emerging or potential environmental problems that you think deserve more attention now so that society can respond to them before they become serious instead of playing “catch up” with them after they emerge?*

Respondents thought a wide array of emerging or potential environmental problems deserved more attention now rather than later. Overall, climate change and the supply of potable water were the two problems cited most frequently, followed closely by loss of habitat and biodiversity. Biotechnology and the genetic alteration of organisms surfaced as the fourth most important emerging environmental problem. Finally, several other potential problems, previously uncited, were mentioned by respondents: urban sprawl, noise pollution and the proliferation of nonindigenous, invasive species.

As in question 6, the importance of each emerging environmental problem varied somewhat by language group, indicating that respondents were concerned not only about global issues, but also about local ones. In all cases, though, the supply of potable water weighed as heavily on each group as it did overall.

## Emerging potential environmental problems



N= 431

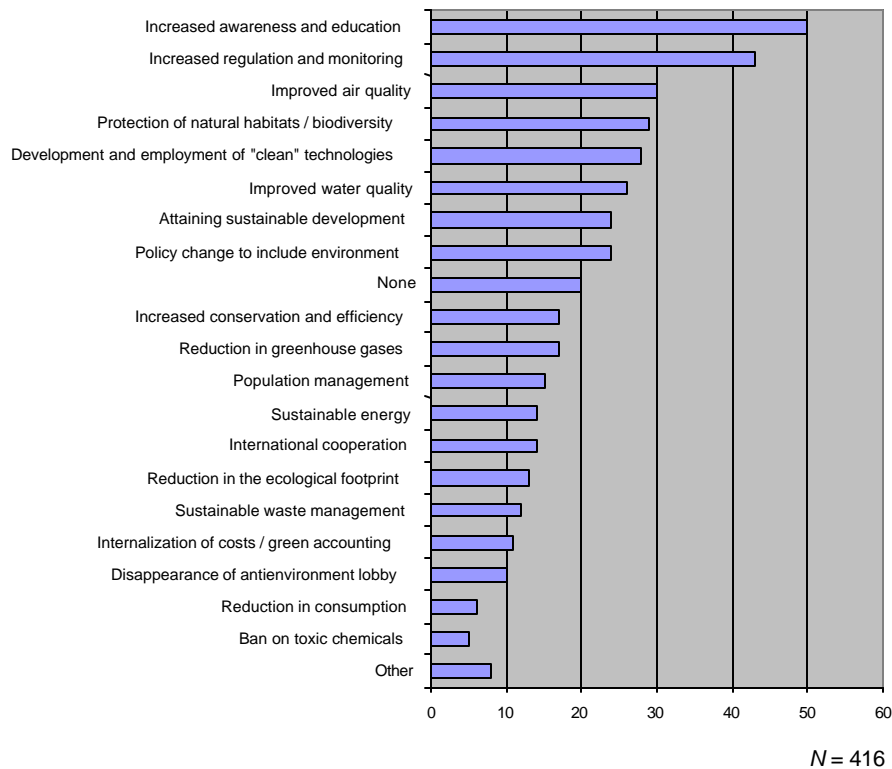
## Question 9

*If you looked back from 2020 and described the **triumph** of North American environmental policy, what would that triumph be?*

The responses to this question were as varied as those to question 8, but, overall, the greatest triumph hoped for the next 20 years was increased awareness and education. Once again, the importance of awareness of environmental issues dominated the responses of all language groups. It would seem that an environmentally informed public is a natural precursor to sustained environmental protection.

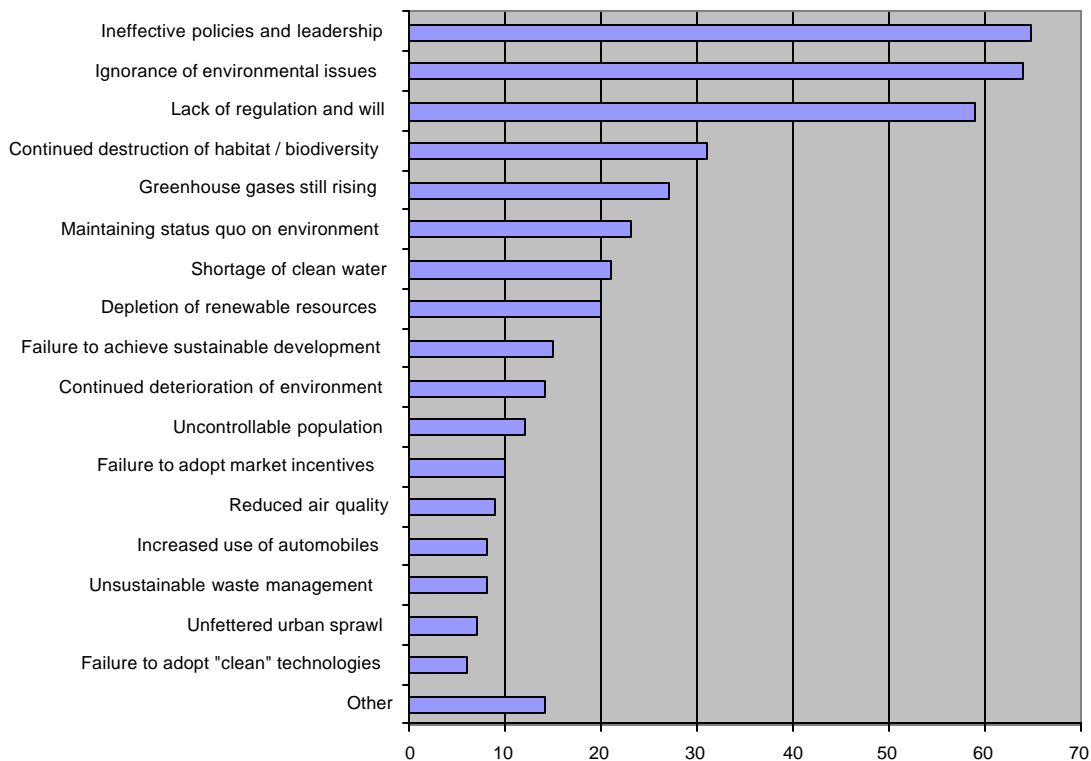
A curious discrepancy arises, though, when responses from to question 9 are compared to those to question 8. When asked in question 8 whether there were any potential environmental problems that deserved more attention now, respondents picked climate change above all others. Yet in question 9 a policy aimed at reducing greenhouse gases fell relatively low on the list of greatest triumphs looking back from 2020. In other words, even though climate change remains at the forefront of potential environmental problems, few respondents anticipated firm action to prevent it within the next 20 years.

### Greatest triumphs in environmental policy over the next 20 years





## Greatest failures in environmental policy over 20 years



N = 413

### Question 10

*If you looked back from 2020 and described the **failure** of environmental policy, what would that failure be?*

Respondents anticipated that the next 20 years would see a host of failures in environmental policy, the most prominent of which would be ineffective policies and leadership, ignorance of environmental issues by the general public and the lack of will to undertake the changes needed to better the environment. In citing these three failures, respondents were basically expressing one point of view: environmental conditions are going to have to get worse before the public, polluters and leaders are willing to acknowledge the impact they are having on the environment and make a strong commitment to reversing it. Here again the three language groups agreed that these expected failures will be the most important hurdles to overcome before we set ourselves down the path to a more sustainable way of life.

## **Question 11**

*Is there anything else you think we should consider to facilitate this process of futures thinking? Is there a question that has not been asked in the course of this questionnaire?*

Respondents had quite a few additional comments and noted questions that should have been considered in the process of thinking about the future. Although there are too many to display here, each response will be considered carefully when planning future surveys and questionnaires.

### **A few final comments**

On the whole, many respondents are beleaguered about the upcoming state of the environment. Most of their concerns revolve around uncontrolled population growth and the environmental repercussions that this would entail, climate change, the loss of natural habitat and biodiversity, and the declining quantity and quality of freshwater resources. Although there were subtle differences in the nature of the most pressing environmental concerns identified by the three language groups, all agreed on their cause: a general lack of will among members of the public and their decisionmakers to bring about the changes needed to preserve the environment.

This being said, even though respondents predicted worse environmental conditions in the short term, most were quick to point out that there is light at the end of the tunnel. They expressed confidence that the tide has turned on today's air of complacency as more and more people are becoming aware of the declining state of the environment, and that it is only a matter of time before a positive and lasting step is made to reverse this trend.

On behalf of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, we would like to thank all of those who took the time and effort to respond to the questionnaire.