



The Ocean Project – National Assessment of Ocean Awareness

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By

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Due to the time allowed, I will only present a brief overview of the review provided to you.

The Ocean Project is an international network of institutions working to increase awareness and appreciation of the importance and value of the oceans to all people.

I want to emphasize, throughout this presentation, when I mention “oceans” that this includes all great bodies of water – like the Great Lakes at our doorstep.

The Ocean Project aims to significantly increase the effectiveness of ocean conservation efforts through an unprecedented collaboration among aquariums, zoos, science, technology, and natural history museums.

Presently, over 200 institutions in North America have joined The Ocean Project, all collaborating to increase ocean awareness in the national audience of over 140 million people who visit these institutions each year.

Because significant gaps existed in understanding the public’s attitudes about, and knowledge of, the oceans, The Ocean Project conducted a nationwide survey of ocean awareness.

This study represents the most comprehensive analysis ever conducted on American attitudes, convictions, values, and knowledge relate to the oceans.

PREVIOUSLY EXISTING DATA:

To begin this nationwide assessment of ocean awareness, we first conducted an analysis of all existing environmental polls that contained ocean-related findings.

Right now, I will mention only 2 key points from these studies:

- First -- Americans place a high priority on the role of aquariums and zoos in educating children about nature and conservation;
- And, second -- Oceans are not top-of-mind for most Americans. When asked what environmental issues are most important today, only 1 % of Americans mentions the oceans.

FOCUS GROUP ANALYSES:

Following the analysis of existing data, we conducted focus group sessions in Baltimore, St. Louis, and San Jose to shape the development of the national survey instrument.

The full results of these studies are contained in the Final Report available online at www.theoceanproject.org.

I will only highlight the key results here:

1. Personal connections to the oceans are broadly limited to beaches and recreational experiences.
2. Oceans evoke emotions and strong feelings.

3. Peoples' perceptions of the importance of the oceans is strongly linked to human survival, but their understanding of tangible connections is very limited.
4. Protecting the oceans lacks urgency in the public's mind.
5. Pollution is seen as the most direct threat to the oceans. Industry is seen as the principal culprit. People see individual roles as very nebulous or not important.
6. Values are key in connecting people to the oceans. To raise awareness of the oceans, communications need to speak to the values that underlie peoples' concerns about the oceans. These include, most powerfully, the values of: protecting self and family; concern for future generations; and, protecting aesthetic value.
7. Communicating about habitats is more effective in raising peoples' concerns about the oceans than focusing on individual species of marine life.

NATIONWIDE SURVEY OF OCEAN AWARENESS:

Following the focus group sessions, we conducted a nationwide telephone survey.

The survey was conducted among 1,500 adults in the continental U.S. and the margin of sampling error was +/- 2.5 percentage points.

Our analysis of the survey data identified nine primary points about public attitudes toward the ocean which are summarized here as follows:

1. *Oceans are viewed as powerful, vast, relaxing, and fun.* Large majorities of the general public connect the oceans with a number of positive words and phrases.

To a lesser extent, oceans are seen as important for emotional well being and to some, are frightening.

2. *The public possesses little awareness of ocean health, especially of the oceans beyond the beach.* When asked about the health of the open, deep oceans, close to half of the public report that they do not know enough about these oceans to give an opinion.

3. *Protecting the oceans is not an urgent issue.* At the moment, the oceans are not perceived to be in immediate danger, and the need for action to protect the oceans is not readily apparent.

When we look at the seriousness of a number of environmental problems, damage to the oceans is considered a second tier environmental problem.

4. *The public possesses only superficial knowledge of the oceans, their functions, and their connection to humans' well being.*

In the survey, three-quarters of Americans strongly agree that the health of the oceans is essential to human survival.

However, the public's understanding of the oceans' importance and the damage now being done to them is superficial. The survey asked five questions to judge knowledge of the oceans and their functions.

On average, Americans fail to answer half of the questions correctly. The mean correct answer on this five-point knowledge scale is 1.9, a failing grade.

5. *Oceans are viewed as vulnerable to lasting damage, but the public does not see individual actions as having a great impact.*

The public may not know a great deal about how the oceans are important, but large majorities have a sense that human actions can cause lasting damage, and that we should not rely on technology to ensure the health of the oceans.

Humans generally are thought to be doing harm to the oceans, but people do not consider individuals as a main source of pollution or damage. Instead, Americans are most likely to see industry as the principal culprit.

6. *Values framework: Balance of nature.*

In the survey, we examined the strength of four values frameworks (which were identified in the focus groups) in raising concerns about the oceans:

- Responsibility to future generations,
- Balance of nature, or Interconnectedness of nature
- Human survival, and,
- The beauty of the oceans.

The balance, or interconnectedness, of nature as a reason to protect the oceans speaks most directly to Americans.

We also find that the values that motivate ocean concerns include a desire to protect oneself and family and a responsibility to future generations.

7. *Effective messages: recreation, responsibility, and future.*

In addition to examining the values that underlie concern for the ocean, we also looked at key messages that can assist in building the case for ocean protection.

The most convincing statements for ocean protection describe the recreational uses of the ocean, individual responsibilities, and the future uses of the oceans.

8. *Most salient threat: pollution.*

We tested the impact of various threats to ocean health -- pollution, over fishing, destructive fishing practices, and coastal development.

Of these threats, pollution is the most likely to engender concern about the oceans.

To a lesser degree, coastal development and destructive fishing practices help to raise concerns about ocean health.

9. *Americans may sacrifice to protect the oceans.*

Finally, the data suggest that Americans consider protecting the oceans a fundamental responsibility, even though they are unaware of ocean conditions.

Large majorities of Americans say they are willing to support actions to protect the oceans even when the tradeoffs of higher prices at the supermarket, fewer recreational choices, or more government spending are presented.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNICATING ABOUT THE OCEANS:

This has been only a brief overview, but, in summary, the greatest impediment to ocean conservation is clearly a broad lack of public awareness about the importance of the oceans to peoples' lives, and the connections that exist between healthy oceans and human survival

The Task We Face is a Need to increase the urgency of ocean protection.

Large majorities of Americans agree that the oceans are an integral part of human survival, but most have only a general idea of how the oceans and human well-being are connected.

Communications need to convey the urgency of these issues and, to expand on the links the public already makes.

The Ocean Project is developing a similar Ocean Communication Strategy, In brief, there are:

Three elements of an effective message on oceans:

- Ocean messages should: recreate and reinforce the positive connections many Americans already have to the oceans, especially recreational and emotional connections.
- Frame the messages and animal care needs of the projects in the values Use the values framework of the balance of nature when presenting information about the oceans and their functions because this holds a high level of credibility with the Board.
- We also need to emphasize the importance and power of individual responsibility for this project.

The Ocean Project is currently training its Partner Institutions in the application of this communications strategy, for them to deliver to the tremendous audience of aquariums, zoos, and science museums across North America. In addition, The Ocean Project is currently developing plans for further research on how people learn in aquarium and museum settings, how messages learned in exhibit experiences are retained, how to maximize the effectiveness of ocean communications, and how to stimulate people to become concerned enough to take responsible personal action on behalf of the oceans.

Finally, I would like to close with

There is a major need for ongoing support for effective programs to increase the public's ocean awareness as outlined in this report.

This should be a specific program, managed as a separate federal mandate to increase ocean awareness among the public, as opposed to a sub-program within the existing structure of the agencies with jurisdiction over the U.S. oceans and coastal zones.

Typically, funds for public education in the budgets of these agencies often remain unidentified, unspent, or directed to other purposes.