

Public Perceptions of Environmental Problems Facing Galveston Bay: Findings from the 1996 "Texas Environmental Survey"

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Introduction

Funded in 1990 and 1992 by grants from the Margaret Cullinan Wray Lead Annuity Trust and the Texas Environmental Center, in 1994 and 1996 by the Southwestern Bell Foundation, and in 1996 by Rice University's Energy and Environmental Systems Institute and by the Galveston Bay Estuary Program, the Department of Sociology at Rice University recently completed its fourth biennial statewide scientific survey of environmental concerns. The actual interviews were conducted, in Spanish and English, from 14 November to 4 December 1996 by Telesurveys of Texas, the Houston research firm. A representative sample of 1001 Texans from across the state participated in interviews lasting an average of more than eighteen minutes, focused on a variety of questions relating both to environmental concerns and to political issues. Additional "oversample" surveys were conducted this year with residents of the five counties surrounding Galveston Bay (Brazoria, Chambers, Galveston, Harris, and Liberty), and new questions were added having to do with "ecotourist" activities and awareness of non-point source pollution problems.

By replicating most of the questions from the surveys conducted in 1990, 1992, and 1994, the data provided a uniquely revealing analysis of the way the views of Texans have been changing on these consequential issues since 1990. When public concern for the environment was particularly evident in the aftermath of the "greenhouse summer" of 1988 and the Exxon-Valdez oil spill of 1989. In the ensuing years, environmental issues have been less salient in the news, economic insecurities have deepened, and the anti-tax, anti-government mood of the electorate has continued to grow. The surveys measure the extent of environmental concern by asking respondents to evaluate the seriousness of pollution at the local, state, and global levels; to choose explicitly between protecting the environment and other important considerations, such as enhancing jobs and economic growth or reducing taxes and the size of government; and to indicate their own participation in a variety of pro-environmental activities.

Continuity and Change in Environmental Attitudes

Across this array of measures, the findings indicate that the commitment to environmental protection has remained surprisingly strong in Texas; in several respects it has grown significantly in recent years. The data make it clear that the anti-government attitudes of most Texans, fully evident in these surveys, does not include support for any lessening of government efforts to protect the environment.

Concerns about environmental pollution have increased substantially in Texas during the past two years. The proportion of respondents believing that pollution is “not much of a problem” in their area declined from 61 percent in 1994 to 54 percent in 1996. Texans in this year’s survey were consistently more likely than in 1994 to express concern about the quality of air and water pollution, the management of hazardous wastes, and exposure to dangerous substances, both in their own communities and in the state as a whole.

Even more firmly today than two years ago, Texas residents reject the suggestion that environmental protection threatens economic well-being. By 65 percent (it was 60 percent in 1994), the respondents were convinced that environmental improvements will create more jobs and help the national economy. Only 18 percent (it was 28 percent two years ago) believed instead that improving the environment will slow economic growth and cost jobs.

The only indication of any apparent lessening of environmental concern was found when Texans were asked about their willingness to pay more from their own pockets to control pollution. Only 44 percent of respondents in this year’s survey were prepared to spend \$200 more each year for the things they buy if such price hikes resulted from new pollution controls. In 1994, 54 percent favored the pollution controls despite their association with these additional costs, as did 63 percent in 1990. Nevertheless, the 1996 respondents were decisively in support (by 69 to 24 percent) of paying an additional 25 cents on their monthly water bill, “in order to build new storm sewers that would prevent polluted runoff from spilling into local waterways.”

Texans are also more reluctant than ever to accept any increase in taxes. By 46 to 40 percent, a majority of the respondents in 1996 are now opposed to “new taxes on coal and oil consumption, in order to reduce the emissions that are thought to cause global warmings.” In 1994, such taxes were favored by 51 to 42 percent. And Texans continue consistently and decisively to reject one environmental initiative in particular. Fully 68 percent of residents in this automobile-dependent state (it was 64 percent in 1994, 61 percent in 1992, 62 percent in 1990) are opposed to higher gasoline taxes.

The surveys also show that Texans’ traditional opposition to government intervention remains firm, but they are prepared to go against their anti-regulatory inclinations when asked about the role of government in protecting the environment. By 66 to 28 percent, Texans today agree that “government interferes too much in our daily lives.” By 63 to 30 percent, however, the same respondents assert that “stronger government regulation is necessary to control industrial pollution.” And by 71 to 24 percent, they support a law that would require people to recycle their trash. Similarly, half of them agree that “government is trying to do too many things that should be left to individuals and businesses”; only 39 percent affirm instead that “government should do more to solve our country’s problems.” But by 60 to 27 percent, they agree that “there should be stricter limits on new housing built in the wetlands or beachfront area of Texas.”

On broader measures of “ecological consciousness,” there are no signs of lessening conviction since 1990, and Texans evidence a clear and consistent shift since 1994 in the direction of stronger environmental sensitivity. By 60 to 32 percent, for example, respondents are even more likely today than in 1992 or 1990 to reject the suggestion that “there’s too much emphasis these days on

conserving natural resources for the future, and not enough on using them for our current needs.” By 77 percent (it was 70 percent two years ago), respondents today disagree with the statement that “humans don’t need to adapt to the natural environment because they can change it to suit their needs.”

By 71 percent, they also disagree with the assertion that “we are not harming the environment when we do normal things, like driving cars and running air conditioners.” Only 39 percent in 1996 (down from 43 percent in 1994) agree that “people worry too much about threats to the global environment.” By 60 percent (up from 54 percent in 1994), Texans today reject the claim that “plants and animals exist primarily to be used by humans.” And by 69 to 17 percent, respondents in this fossil-fuel energy state are clear that, if a new utility plant is to be built in their area, it should use “renewable resources, such as wind or solar energy, “rather than “traditional energy sources, such as coal or oil.”

In sum, the surveys reveal significant increases since 1994 in Texans’ concerns about local and statewide pollution, in their belief that environmental protection is consistent with economic growth, and above all in their “ecological consciousness,” in their recognition of the need to bring human numbers and appetites into balance with the environmental constraints of a finite planet. At the same time, reflecting the growing economic insecurities, the data indicate even more resistance than in earlier years to higher taxes or product costs to pay for increased environmental protection. “Texans Keep Eye on Pollution, Hand on Wallets” was the way the Houston Chronicle (March 5, 1997) summarized these findings.

Residents of the Galveston Bay Area

The original survey of 1001 Texans reached 201 respondents from the five counties surrounding Galveston Bay. To these were added interviews with 50 respondents from each of the counties, and a further oversample of 119 from Galveston County, to reach a total of 570 respondents from the Bay area. These included 57 from Liberty County, 51 from Chambers County, 62 from Brazoria County, 181 from Galveston County, and 219 from Harris County. The expanded samples make it possible to explore the differences in perceptions and attitudes among residents in the five Galveston Bay counties, and to compare their views with the rest of the Texas population.

Respondents from the five Galveston Bay counties evidenced far more concern about the local environment, and this was particularly the case for residents from Galveston County itself. Respondents from the five counties were significantly more likely than others in the state of Texas to assert that air pollution (35 percent), water pollution (28 percent), the management of hazardous wastes (25 percent), and exposure to dangerous substances (24 percent) are “very serious” problems in their communities; the comparable proportions for the rest of the state were 18 percent (air pollution), 22 percent (water pollution), 16 percent (hazardous wastes), and 14 percent (dangerous substances). The Galveston Bay respondents were also more likely (by 53 percent, to 47 percent for the rest of Texas) to advocate additional spending on the environment. And they were significantly more likely than other Texans (by 66 percent, compared to 58 percent statewide) to

agree that “there should be stricter limits on new housing built in the wetlands or beachfront areas of Texas.”

Despite their generally greater environmental sensitivity, the residents of the counties surrounding Galveston Bay are somewhat less likely to act on those concerns. The percentages of respondents from the rest of Texas who report that they have engaged in pro-environmental activities (such as recycling, contributing to an environmental organization, participating in a local environmental project, avoiding the purchase or use of environmentally damaging products) are consistently--but usually not significantly--higher than among residents of the five-county area. The data also show, however, that the respondents from the Bay area are much less likely to report that they live in neighborhoods with either curbside recycling (37 to 52 percent) or a “household hazardous waste disposal site” (31 to 38 percent). Despite fewer resources, Bay area residents are thus involved to almost the same extent as other Texans in pro-environmental behaviors, suggesting a stronger overall commitment to environmental protection.

When asked about activities that are potentially damaging to the environment, there were no differences between Bay area respondents and those from elsewhere in Texas; and both groups evidenced high levels of environmental responsibility. Of the 31 percent who said they had changed their motor oil in the past year, 75 percent disposed of the used oil by taking it to a service station or other recycling facility; only 12 percent admitted throwing it out with the trash or dumping it in the yard. Of those who have a lawn, only 14 percent said they used fertilizers on it as often as every three months. Of those few (8 percent) who had to dispose of paint in the past year, 46 percent said they took it to a disposal center. These numbers indicate that a high proportion of Texans not only understand the need to act in environmentally responsible ways, but also claim to do so.

Not surprisingly, respondents from the Bay area are more likely to report having visited or used the waterways of Texas: 29 percent said they often went “boating or fishing somewhere in Texas” during the past year, and 36 percent often visited Galveston Bay, compared to 20 percent and 2-percent of the respondents from elsewhere in Texas. Bay area residents were not, however, more likely to report having “visited a state park or other natural areas in Texas,” nor to have “gone swimming in a lake, river, or bay in Texas.”

Several new questions in this year’s survey were asked only of the residents from the five counties surrounding the Bay. While most measures of water pollution in Galveston Bay have found it to be getting better over the past decade, less than one-fifth of those living closest to the Bay recognize the improvement. By 30 percent to just 18 percent, the respondents were much more likely to believe that pollution in Galveston Bay is getting worse rather than better; another 33 percent said they thought it had stayed about the same.

Despite their concerns about pollution, a plurality of 45 to 38 percent believe the seafood that comes from the Bay is generally safe to eat, and by 58 to 32 percent they are decisively in favor of “spending more public funds to buy additional land surrounding Galveston Bay in order to set aside more protected areas as nature preserves or parks.” Most importantly, perhaps, by 61 to 24 percent, Bay area residents overwhelmingly believe that pollution in the Bay is mainly caused by point sources (“industrial activity, such as oil refining and chemical plants”) rather than by non-point

sources in the combined effects of individual behaviors (“such as pollution from cars, litter, and lawn-care products”).

Conclusions

The surveys indicate that residents in the Galveston Bay region are generally more environmentally aware and concerned than are those in the rest of the state. The findings also suggest that Texans generally (but by no means universally) understand the need to act in environmentally responsible ways, that Bay area residents are undeserved in terms of curbside recycling and household hazardous waste disposal programs, and that they clearly underestimate the role of non-point sources in contributing to the pollution of Galveston Bay.

More generally, the fourth biennial “Texas Environmental Survey” suggests that a firm consensus on the importance of environmental protection has now taken hold within the general public. That consensus has persisted and in some respects even grown stronger in the years since 1990--when environmental issues have been less salient and economic insecurities, along with anti-government attitudes, have continued to grow. Because of these countervailing public preoccupations, it has been easy to lose sight of the degree to which the vast majority of ordinary Texans (and other Americans) are in fact prepared to support public policies that move the state and nation in new directions, toward the goal of reconciling economic opportunity with environmental protection and sustainable development.