

# Going Green(ish)

*Who walks the environmental walk ?*

By *Diane Crispell*

Remember Arbor Day? Although it's been supplanted (pun intended) to some extent by Earth Day in the past thirty-one years, it was presumably the first national environmental holiday. Likewise, Smokey Bear has been joined over the years by nature-conscious mascots such as Earth Dog; but the 56-year-old bruin remains the original voice of individual responsibility: "Only *you* can prevent forest fires."

So where do Americans stand today in our relationship with the physical world? At a higher level of awareness than two decades ago, but perhaps an even higher level of complacency. Most of us fall into the "I want to be a good person, but there are limits" category. We know we cause pollution and we know it's a bad thing, but we are not sure how far we are willing to go to remedy the situation. We want to do what's right, but we don't want it to be too hard. We are torn between knowing we are largely the cause of environmental problems, and wanting them to be someone else's responsibility.

Although Earth Day may have become a token "green holiday" for many, the environmental movement from which it sprang, or itself spawned, has permanently raised the bar on Americans' environmental awareness. In 1974 the Roper Organization, now Roper Starch Worldwide, asked American adults which problems would be serious in the year 2000. Four years after the first Earth Day highlighted a period of environmental consciousness-raising, 68% listed severe air pollution and 69% water pollution. Asked the same question in 2000 in terms of "25 to 50 years from now," the levels remained high, if not a bit higher: 75% listed air pollution and 74% water pollution.

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That said, the environment is often a back-burner issue. When asked what defines the American Dream, nearly half of adults in 2000 said, "to live in a natural environment free from pollution." But this fell fourteenth on a list of sixteen choices. Owning a home, freedom, financial security and education are far more important components of the Dream; and Americans are much more worried about crime, health care costs, education, drug abuse, and the breakdown of family values than they are about pollution.

Specific events can spur a flare of concern, though, both here and abroad. According to an ongoing Roper Reports Worldwide global study, the share of French people aged 13 to 65 listing environmental pollution among their top personal concerns rose from 27% to 38% between 1999 and 2000. It's likely this gain was due largely to two major oil spills that occurred off the Brittany coast between these two waves of the study.

In contrast, increased complacency was apparent in Germany, where 12% of people worried about pollution in 2000, down markedly from 26% in the 1998 wave. Widespread recycling practices and the presence of Green Party members in the government may have assured Germans that things were on the right track.

Concern about pollution in South Korea also took a nosedive, but for a different reason than in Germany. Koreans' top concern in 2000 was recession and unemployment, leaping 23 points in one year, to 71%. Overarching economic concerns overshadowed worry about the environment.

This tends to be the rule for other countries as well. The environment often emerges as a top concern only when nothing else is more compelling. The biggest competition for the environment in people's "worryspace" is the economy. When people don't have to worry about their jobs or making ends meet, they tend to focus more attention on matters such as social ills and the environment.

This rule of thumb explains why a record high 22% of Americans listed pollution among their top personal concerns in the prosperous summer of 2000. That, of course, and rising gas prices.

A twist on the rule explains how people can worry about the economy and the environment at the same time—when both are going haywire in tandem. Gas prices and energy shortages in California hit people’s sense of green in two ways: the environment and their pocketbooks. As of spring 2001, 57% of American adults agreed that a “rapid depletion of natural resources” is likely to occur in coming years, up 15 points from 1998. A smaller but also growing share viewed this possibility as a “threat to life and society as we know it” (43%, up 18 points from 1998).

Sometimes competing social issues far outweigh the environment. In South Africa, where problems like crime and AIDS are mind-boggling, merely 3% felt able to spare any concern for pollution. In contrast, some cultures can’t escape the problem of pollution even when they have other things to worry about. Half of Japanese placed pollution among their top personal concerns, nearly double the 27% average across all 32 countries studied (see Figure 1).

Why do people worry about the environment? First and foremost, because it affects their health. The top-rated reason Americans cite for protecting the environment is to protect human health, followed by protecting resources for future generations. Ensuring the vitality of natural places and other species is substantially less important.

Some people think about the environment even when it doesn’t directly affect their physical or financial wellbeing. For them, it is always a top priority, embedded in their lifestyle, their very values system. These are the environmental activists, those who Roper Starch’s annual Green Gauge study

terms True-Blue Greens. These people don’t just talk the talk; they take action.

Comprising 11% of the adult US population, according to the 2000 Green Gauge study, True-Blue Greens are the few trying to make up for the deficits of the many. Greenback Greens, the 5% who are willing to expend money on behalf of Mother Earth in lieu of expending time and effort as True-Blue Greens do, are an even smaller group. One-third of Americans are Sprouts who show some promise. They care, but not enough to do a lot. They need information and motivation. Grouzers (18%) say they care, but make lots of excuses for not doing more. They will grudgingly abide by recycling rules and such, but they won’t respond to guilt tactics to go the extra step as Sprouts may. Basic Browns are the problematic 31% of Americans who don’t care and aren’t ashamed to admit it.

These segments have remained relatively stable since first measured in 1990. There certainly has been no movement toward a greener-oriented America.

What do Americans do about the environment besides worry about it? The most common actions are conserving electricity and recycling bottles, cans and so on; slightly over half do so on a regular basis. According to the Green Gauge survey, nearly half recycle newspapers, and 38% participate in curbside recycling. Most of these actions have been made simpler, not to mention mandatory, in many communities. Half the respondents reported their communities have voluntary recycling programs, and one in four said such programs are mandatory.

The least popular green activities require more money or effort. About one in four Americans reads labels on pesticides or other products with an eye to their environmental impact, or buys products with recycled content or packaging. About one in ten actively buys from green companies or avoids anti-green ones. Fewer than 10% go

so far as to get involved with environmental causes themselves, by contributing money or time to green groups, or by writing to politicians or businesses about environmental issues. Just 18% of Basic Browns and Grouzers, on average, regularly engage in any of the 16 measured pro-environmental actions, compared with 47% of True-Blue Greens.

What excuses do people make for inaction? Lack of time and money, mostly.

**Figure 1**  
**Pollution Low on the List**

**Question:** Here is a list of things people have told us they are concerned about today... [T]ell me the 3 things you personally are most concerned about today.

*Percent who selected “environmental pollution” from a list of 15*



**Source:** Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, December 2000-February 2001.

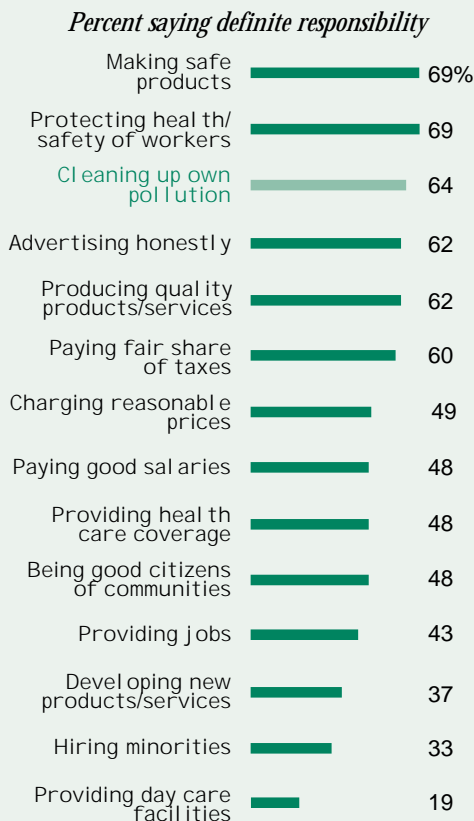
Just over half said they are “too busy” to make changes, and half said environmental products are “too expensive.” Many defer responsibility, saying that “large companies, not people like me, should take action.”

Lots of Americans claim ignorance; 56% agreed they “would like to do more for the environment, but don’t know how.” For some, this is a convenient excuse. Others may be at a genuine loss to know how they as individuals can be of help. At the same time, Americans remain convinced of the power of the individual to make a difference. Just 35% agreed pollution is too big a problem for individuals to do anything about, and merely 18% said corporations are the only ones who can affect the environment.

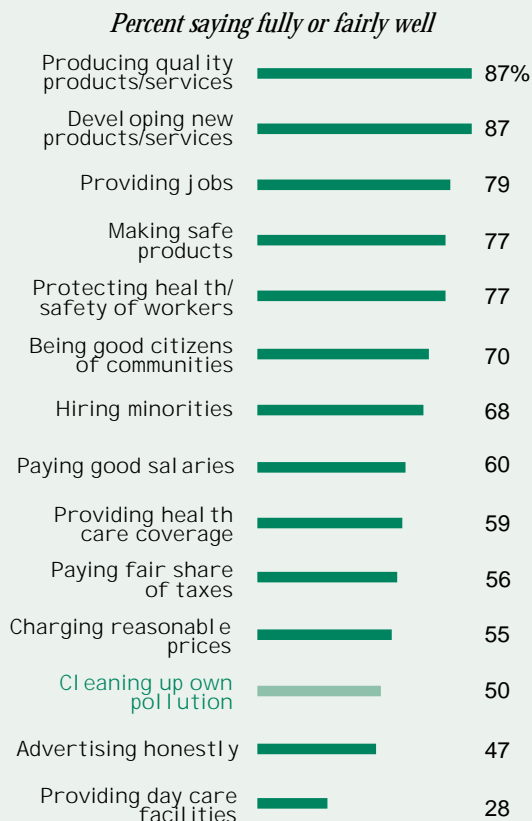
Figure 2

## Business Isn’t Cleaning Up

**Question:** ...[T]ell me whether you consider [each item] to be a definite responsibility of business...



**Question:** ...[T]ell me whether you think business fulfills its responsibilities [for each item] fully, fairly well, not too well, or not at all well...



**Source:** Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, December 2-16, 2000.

This doesn’t mean business is off the hook. Far from it. Three in four Americans think big businesses should be required to “prepare an annual statement of their impact on the environment.” Half do not consider as environmentally friendly companies that do only the minimum required by law. Asked to rank 14 items as “definite responsibilities” of businesses, Americans placed “cleaning up their own air and water pollution” behind only making safe products and protecting worker health and safety, which tied for first place (see Figure 2). Yet cleaning up after themselves ranked twelfth as an obligation people feel businesses fulfill fully or

fairly well. In other words, corporate America could be doing a lot better.

Americans want the government involved, too. Most would like to see more environmental regulation. Six in ten said regulation of industrial toxic waste disposal is insufficient; similar numbers said the same about air and water quality.

Yet Americans cannot escape their inherent sense of individual responsibility. This cultural trait hasn’t been lost on the USDA Forest Service. In partnership with the National Association of State Foresters and Advertising Council, the agency is

going for scare tactics similar to the classic “This is your brain on drugs” public service advertisements. Its new TV spots feature a crime scene complete with chalk outline—of a deer killed by careless young adults who failed to douse their campfire. The message is subtly different but as forcefully made. “Only *you* can prevent *wildfires*.” Smokey Bear doesn’t speak the tagline, but he’s still there, silently, to ensure we get the point. ●

*The author lives on a rural hilltop perfectly situated for an electricity-generating windmill, which would eventually pay for itself and be cool to boot. But she keeps putting it off...*