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RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS

Communicating About Oceans: Results of a National Survey

**Conducted for
The OCEAN Project**

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October 1999

Introduction

Anne Platt McGinn illustrates in her book, *Safeguarding the Health of the Oceans*, the damage humanity has caused oceans and the potential destruction to come. Currently, most commercial fish species are fully or overexploited. More than half of the world's coastlines are threatened by development and pollution, and coral reefs are dying from cyanide poisoning, pollution, and global warming.

Ten years ago the Exxon Valdez spill focused public attention on the destruction humans can do to the oceans. However, at the moment, the American public is generally unaware of the condition of the oceans and does not perceive ocean health as an urgent issue. Increasing the saliency of ocean health in order to build commitment to protecting the health of the oceans is the task ahead for aquariums, zoos, and science museums.

In a national telephone survey for The OCEAN Project, Belden Russonello & Stewart (BRS), in collaboration with American Viewpoint, explored the public's connections, values, attitudes, and knowledge relating to the oceans. Our goal was to better understand what needs to be communicated to build awareness and to increase Americans' concerns about the health of the oceans.

Before embarking on the survey, BRS conducted six focus groups among people who have visited an aquarium, zoo, or science museum in the last two years. The focus group analysis, which identified values and beliefs that are decisive when discussing ocean protection, contributed greatly to our understanding of public attitudes and to the crafting of relevant questions for the poll.

The national survey for The OCEAN Project was conducted among 1,500 adults in the continental United States from July 24 to August 8, 1999. The margin of sampling error for the study is +/- 2.5 percentage points.

Summary of Key Findings

The national survey of 1,500 adults across the United States from July 24 to August 8 asked Americans dozens of questions on their attitudes toward the oceans. This section provides an overview and summary of key analytical points of the survey.

As we found in the focus group phase of this research, aquariums, zoos, and science museums have a unique opportunity to educate the public about the importance of oceans. At the moment, Americans are not generally concerned about the health of the oceans, and we find the public possesses only a very basic understanding of the oceans, their functions, and their connections to human survival. However, communicating to the public with facts alone is not likely to increase the saliency of these issues. To raise concern and urgency, we must link factual information about the oceans and the threats to them with people's personal connection to the oceans, their values, and everyday lives.

Our analysis of the survey data identifies key points about public attitudes toward the oceans that will inform how aquariums, zoos, and science museums can strengthen commitment to ocean protection.

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. As we heard in the focus groups, the oceans are viewed as: powerful; vast; relaxing; and fun. To a lesser extent, they are seen as important for emotional well-being and 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 and slightly over a quarter say so for coastal waters. Americans who live within a two-hour drive of the ocean are more familiar with coastal waters, but four in ten of them are still unable to offer an opinion about the deep oceans.

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. Lack of urgency about oceans' health is demonstrated by the plurality of four in ten Americans who rate the health of coastal waters and ocean beaches as "only fair;" close to a quarter say it is good or excellent; and only one in ten says poor.

When we look at the seriousness of a number of environmental problems, damage to the oceans is considered a second tier environmental problem. Threats to the oceans are seen as less serious than air and water pollution and toxic waste, and about as serious as global climate change, species extinction, and overconsumption of resources in the U.S.

4. *The public possesses only superficial knowledge of the oceans, their functions, and their connection to humans' well-being.* In the focus groups, when asked why oceans are important, many participants responded simply, "we can't live without them." 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. Americans on average fail to answer half correctly. The mean correct answer on this five-point knowledge scale is 1.9. Looking at individual responses, we find that only about one in ten Americans answers four or five of the questions correctly. About four in ten are able to give correct answers to only one or fewer of the five questions.

Of the five questions, a majority correctly answers that humans are the main cause of extinction of plant and animal life in the oceans and that the oceans affect the climate and rainfall. However, large majorities of Americans do not know that the plant life in the oceans produces more oxygen than plant life in forests and that runoff from yards, pavement, and roads is the cause of most ocean pollution.

5. *Oceans are viewed as vulnerable to lasting damage, but the public does not see individual actions as having a great impact.* The survey results show that some of the currents of opinion found problematic in the focus groups are not widespread when measured across the nation. For example, the view that the oceans are vast was a reason to hold a low concern for ocean health among some of the focus group participants. The survey indicates that this is not a problem for majorities of Americans, who believe both that oceans are vast and that they are vulnerable.

The public may not know a great deal about how the oceans do their work, but large majorities have a sense that human actions can cause lasting damage, and that we should not rely on either technology or mother nature entirely to ensure the health of the oceans. This belief in general responsibility, however, does not translate into widespread personal responsibility, as the public is split over whether individual actions can make a difference to ocean health.

Therefore, humans generally are thought to be doing harm to the oceans, but individuals are not considered the main source of pollution or damage. Americans are more likely to see industry as the culprit.

6. *Currently low levels of personal importance placed on protecting oceans.* Low levels of awareness of ocean health and lack of personal responsibility for the oceans' health lead to relatively small numbers of Americans who place very high personal importance on "protecting the environmental quality of the oceans."

Those Americans most concerned about ocean health at the outset of the survey include: women, blacks and Hispanics, Americans with low levels of education and income, residents of the Northeast, and those who live near the ocean.

7. *Facts alone will not increase concern for oceans' health.* An analysis of attitudes indicates that association with the oceans as fun, relaxing, and important to emotional well-being are decisive in building concern for the oceans. On the other hand, knowledge of the oceans' functions and qualities is less predictive of concern, and therefore, facts about the oceans on their own are less useful in building commitment to ocean protection.

8. *Values framework: Balance of nature.* In raising awareness of the oceans, communications need to speak to the values that underlie the public's concerns about the oceans. In the survey, we examined the strength of four values frameworks in raising concerns about the oceans -- responsibility to future generations, balance of nature, human survival, and the beauty of the oceans. The balance of nature as a reason to protect the oceans speaks most directly to Americans. We also find that as with many other environmental issues, the values that motivate ocean concerns include a desire to protect oneself and family and a responsibility to future generations. The least useful value to call upon in building broad commitment to ocean protection is an appreciation of the beauty of the oceans, although this is a very strong attraction for a small segment of the public.

9. *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 messages can be broken-down into three groups.

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

Slightly less convincing of the need to protect oceans are statements about the special qualities and functions of the oceans -- production of oxygen and the amount of life in the oceans. The least useful messages in appealing broadly to Americans about the need to protect the oceans are those which highlight the dangers of coastal development and loss of jobs in the fishing industry.

10. *Most salient threat: pollution.* Embedded within some of the message statements are the threats to ocean health -- pollution, overfishing, destructive fishing practices, and coastal development. Of these threats, pollution is the most likely to engender concern about the oceans. To a lesser degree, development and destructive fishing practices help to raise concerns about ocean health.

In the focus groups, after we explained the impacts of coastal development and harmful fishing practices that are wasteful and destructive, these practices were viewed among the most egregious examples of damage to the oceans. Coastal development and destructive fishing practices are areas about which zoos, aquariums, and science museums need to provide more information and educate the public if they are to be used effectively in building commitment for ocean protection. At the moment, the public does not know enough about the impacts of these practices to engender strong feelings.

11. *Americans may sacrifice to protect the oceans.* The data suggest that protecting the oceans is considered a fundamental responsibility by Americans, 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. The next step for zoos, aquariums, and science museums is to make this issue urgent and increase the saliency of ocean health.