

Public Support for Environmental Protection Remains Strong

In the last few years it has become the fashion in some business and industry circles to characterize the environmental movement as a fad which, while promoted largely by a zealous upper-middle-class elite, unfortunately has led to regulatory excesses that the nation can ill afford.

This view of environmentalists and the environmental movement has not, however, been supported by public opinion polls. Repeated surveys by respected polling organizations such as Gallup, Harris, and the Opinion Research Corporation have shown broad public support for environmental regulation, and this despite an awareness that for the taxpayer or consumer such regulation is by no means a free lunch. The results of the latest such poll, conducted this past summer by the Bureau of Social Science Research, Inc., of Washington, D.C., for Resources for the Future (RFF), seem particularly convincing on this point.

Robert C. Mitchell, the RFF sociologist who planned this public opinion survey, points out that the telephone interviewing by the pollsters was done "just weeks after California voted for Proposition 13 by a 2-to-1 margin and the media declared a 'tax revolt' to be spreading across the country." Also, the polling took place at a time of rising concern about inflation and assertions by some Washington officials that environmental regulation was helping to fuel it. On top of this, the Supreme Court, in a ruling based on the requirements of the Endangered Species Act, had just held that the Tellico Dam—on which more than \$100 million already had been spent—could not be completed because it might wipe out the snail darter, a 3-inch minnow which has been the target of much editorial ridicule. As Mitchell sized up the circumstances, if ever there was a good time, short of war or depression, to test the "hypothesis that environmentalism is an enduring concern," this was it.

Yet, even though only 5 percent of the more than 1000 persons in the sample belonged to environmental groups such as the Sierra Club, Friends of the Earth, and the Audubon Society, the poll found support for environmental protection to be strong and virtually unchanged from previous years. Fifty-three percent of the interviewees chose, as best approximating their own point of view, the following rather provocatively worded statement: "Protecting the environment is so *important* that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing improvements must be made *regardless* of cost." (Emphasis in the original, as read to interviewees.) At the other end of the spectrum, only 10 percent accepted the statement that "Pollution control requirements and standards have gone *too far*" and already cost more than they are worth. Thirty-one percent accepted the view that enough progress in cleaning up the environment had been made and that "we should now concentrate on *holding down costs* rather than requiring stricter controls."

According to Mitchell, the interviewers who conducted the poll reported that the respondents had given this and other "trade off questions" a great deal of thought. He says that a number of respondents who chose the "regardless of costs" option commented spontaneously that, while they recognized that costs could not be ignored, this option was closer to their views than the alternative that emphasized holding the line on costs.

Another question was: "In order to pay for cleaning up the environment, companies may have to charge more for their products and services, and the government may have to increase taxes. Do you think that *now* it is more important to pay higher prices to protect the environment, or to pay lower prices but have more air and water pollution?" Sixty-two percent preferred paying higher prices to protect the environment, while only 18 percent chose lower prices and more pollution.

When asked which is the more important, producing energy or protecting the environment, 47 percent chose the latter while 31 percent chose the former; 17 percent declined to choose one over the other and volunteered that "both" were important. Although most national environmental groups are either avowedly antinuclear or leaning that way, 65 percent of the respondents in this poll were from "fairly favorable" to "very favorable" to nuclear power plants.

Asked about the campaigns of environmental groups to "protect and expand the national parks and wilderness areas," 62 percent of the interviewees felt that they and their families benefited from a "fair amount" to a "great deal" from such efforts. (Ironically, a 1977 poll commissioned by the American Forest Institute, the educational and communications arm of the lumber and forest products industry, produced a rather similar finding. In this poll, conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, one question went like this: "Currently we have nearly 15 million acres of wilderness areas in 38 states. That's almost 23,000 square miles, or equivalent to a strip nearly 10 miles wide from the east coast to the west coast. Do you think there is too much wilderness area set aside, too little, or about the right amount?" Despite this wording of the question, almost a third of the respondents said "too little" and only 7 percent said "too much.")

In the RFF survey, the respondents fell across the entire range of education and income levels. Even among the poorest and least educated, at least half regarded themselves as "sympathetic" to the environmental movement. Indeed, while 68 percent of the respondents earning more than \$30,000 a year were sympathetic, so were about 60 percent of those earning from just under \$14,000 down to \$6,000 or less.

"Big Interests" Seen Holding Sway

Almost three-fourths of respondents felt that taxes are "unreasonable" or "very unreasonable." When asked whether they felt the government is "pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves" or is run for the benefit of all, only a fourth chose the latter. Sixty-six percent felt that self-serving "big interests" were holding sway.

In Mitchell's view, the public favors spending more money on improving the quality of life through environmental protection, crime control, better health services, and the like, but wants government to be efficient and effective. In registering both its enthusiasm for tax-cutting proposals such as Proposition 13 and its continued support for the environmental movement, he says, "The public is sending a shot across the bows of both the arrogant inflation fighter and the spendthrift bureaucrat." —LUTHER J. CARTER