

Media Relations

Carsey Institute: Americans' Knowledge Of Polar Regions Up, But Not Their Concern

Environmental Issues In Polar Regions Are Polarizing

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DURHAM, N.H. – Americans' knowledge of facts about the polar regions of the globe has increased since 2006, but this increase in knowledge has not translated into more concern about changing polar environments, according to new research from the Carsey Institute at the University of New Hampshire.

"People's knowledge of polar regions and issues improved from 2006 to 2010, consistent with hopes that the International Polar Year in 2007 would boost public awareness. Unfortunately, we did not see a companion increase in concern about the environmental changes in these regions, due, in part, to ideological and political divisions," said Lawrence Hamilton, professor of sociology at UNH and a senior fellow at the Carsey Institute.

Carsey Institute researchers, with support from the National Science Foundation, conducted the first comparative analysis of queries about the polar regions, which were included on the General Social Survey in 2006 and 2010. The polar questions covered topics such as climate change, melting ice, rising sea levels, and human or ecological impacts from environmental change. The surveys formed bookends to the International Polar Year in 2007-2008, which focused on scientific research along with outreach and education efforts to raise awareness of polar science.

The researchers found that the public's knowledge about the north and south polar regions showed modest gains between 2006 and 2010. The average "polar knowledge score" improved from 53 to 59 percent.

The surveys also carried an 11-question "science literacy" quiz, testing background knowledge about science. Science literacy did not improve from 2006 to 2010, but people with higher science literacy tend to care more about polar environmental change. More scientifically literate respondents also are more likely to favor reserving the Antarctic for science, rather than opening it to commercial development.

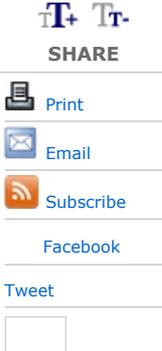
Unlike polar knowledge, concern about climate change in the polar regions showed no up or down trend, and there were no changes in support for reserving the Antarctic for science. However, the researchers found there has been an increase in political disagreement between Democrats and Republicans on climate-related questions.

"Among the environment-related issues, all but reserving Antarctica for science show increasing political polarization — and even support for reserving the Antarctic divides along party lines. Polar issues, like many other topics in science, increasingly are viewed by the public through politically tinted glasses," Hamilton said.

The complete Carsey Institute report about this research is available at <http://www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu/CarseySearch/search.php?id=183>. The research was conducted by Hamilton, Matthew Cutler, graduate student in sociology, and Andrew Schaefer, graduate student in sociology and a research assistant at the Carsey Institute.

The Carsey Institute conducts policy research on vulnerable children, youth, and families and on sustainable community development. The institute gives policy makers and practitioners the timely, independent resources they need to effect change in their communities. For more information about the Carsey Institute, go to www.carseyinstitute.unh.edu.

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