

Urban-Rural Differences in Concern about the Environment and Jobs in the Puget Sound Region

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Difficult economic conditions and wide-ranging environmental issues confront communities across the Puget Sound region of Washington. Statewide unemployment has reached 8.5 percent, and recent studies find that problems ranging from water pollution to habitat loss threaten the coastal environment.¹ Carsey Institute researchers are collaborating with scientists from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Fisheries to investigate the social forces that influence views about environmental problems in Puget Sound. More in-depth social data and analysis can inform the efforts of policymakers attempting to meet the needs of local communities while maintaining the health of Puget Sound.

We surveyed 1,980 individuals residing in Puget Sound.² Here we outline results from a set of questions that gauged residents' views about the severity of different environmental problems. Key differences appear based on the type of environmental issue and whether residents lived in urban, suburban, or rural locales. We also compare the strength of concern about the lack of jobs and beliefs about the environment.

We asked respondents whether they believed four broad environmental concerns were serious problems for the future of the country (see Figure 1). Significantly more individuals viewed ocean pollution, overfishing, and climate change as more serious issues than overharvesting of timber.³ Less concern about the seriousness of overharvesting of timber nation-wide may reflect the importance of the forest products industry to the Washington economy. When asked about issues confronting their community, Puget Sound residents were also apprehensive about the effects of environmental and economic challenges locally (see Figure 2). Fully 77 percent of respondents stated that a lack of jobs was an important problem for their community, which is not surprising given the difficult current economic conditions. Interestingly, nearly as many (73 percent) felt the loss of habitat for fish and wildlife was a concern. The differences between responses to

Key Findings

- Too few jobs and the loss of wildlife habitat were the two community issues most likely to be ranked as important problems among residents of Puget Sound.
- Environmental concern is higher among urban than rural residents, while those in rural areas are more likely than urbanites to believe the lack of jobs is a threat to their community.

FIGURE 1. BELIEFS ABOUT THE NATIONAL IMPLICATIONS OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

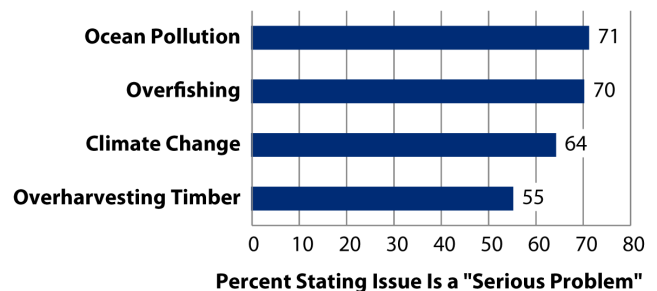
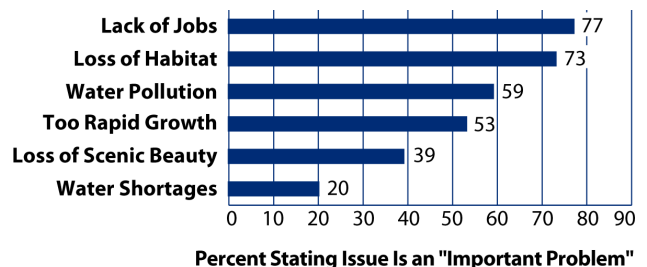


FIGURE 2. BELIEFS ABOUT LOCAL ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES



these two items were not statistically significant. This suggests that residents of the Puget Sound region are acutely aware that changes in environmental quality, as well as limited job opportunities, are negatively affecting their communities.

Although residents share a concern about the environment and economic challenges, their views differ depending on whether they live in rural, suburban, or urban locales (see Figures 3A and 3B).⁴ Rural residents were significantly more likely to view the lack of jobs as problematic, while urban residents were more likely to view habitat loss as a critical issue facing their community.⁵ Rural Mason County has the highest unemployment in the Puget Sound region at 11.2 percent, while coastal habitat loss has been pronounced in urban locales.⁶ These patterns suggest that underlying economic conditions and exposure to environmental change may influence perceptions about the implications of environmental issues for communities across Puget Sound.

FIGURE 3A. LACK OF JOB OPPORTUNITIES BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE

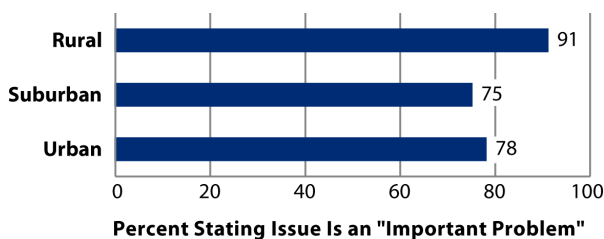
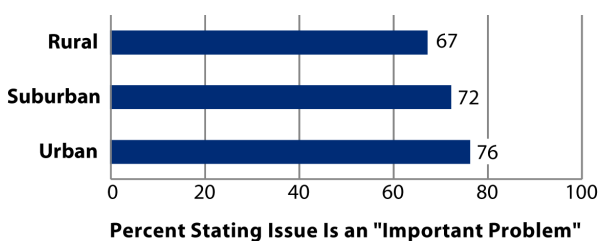


FIGURE 3B. LOSS OF HABITAT FOR WILDLIFE BY PLACE OF RESIDENCE



Resolving environmental problems is a challenging endeavor that has important social implications. The results reported here illustrate that Puget Sound residents view environmental issues as serious problems. However, levels of concern vary by the type of issue and place of residence. Our findings demonstrate that beliefs about the environment are multidimensional and issue specific. By highlighting the inter-relationships between social and environmental factors, social scientists can aid policymakers as they attempt to develop management approaches that are both socially and environmentally sustainable.

ENDNOTES

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Local Area Unemployment Characteristics – July 2012" (Washington, DC: BLS, 2012), <http://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>; M. Ruckelshaus, T. Essington, and P. Levin, "Puget Sound, Washington, USA," *Ecosystem-Based Management for the Oceans*, edited by K. McLeod and H. Leslie (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2009); S. A. Morely and J. R. Karr, "Assessing and Restoring the Health of Urban Streams in the Puget Sound Basin," *Conservation Biology*, vol. 16 (2002):1498–1509; K. Stark, S. Mickelson, and S. Keever, "Water Quality Status Report for Marine Waters, 2005-2007" (Seattle: King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks, 2009).
2. The UNH Survey Center administered a random digit dial phone survey to respondents in King, Kitsap, Mason, Pierce, Skagit, and Whatcom counties between January and February 2012 and July and August 2012. Data were weighted to make slight alterations for nonresponse by age, race, and sex and to adjust for known effects of sampling design (for example, county population and household size).
3. Differences are statistically significant using a Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons ($\alpha=0.0125$).
4. Place-related categorizations are based on respondents' ZIP code and U.S. Census designations of urban, suburban, and rural locales.
5. Analysis of variance with a Scheffe posthoc test comparing averages within each type of community demonstrates statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.
6. Washington State Employment and Security Department (WSED), "Target Employment Areas" (Olympia, WA: WSED, 2012), <https://for-tress.wa.gov/esd/employmentdata/reports-publications/regional-reports/targeted-employment-areas>; S. A. Morely and J. R. Karr, "Assessing and Restoring the Health of Urban Streams in the Puget Sound Basin," *Conservation Biology*, vol. 16 (2002):1498–1509; Puget Sound Partnership (PSP), "Puget Sound Action Agenda: Protecting and Restoring the Puget Sound Ecosystem by 2020" (Olympia, WA: PSP, 2008).

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