



RESEARCH SUMMARY

**October 2006**

# **The American Environmental Values Survey**

American Views on the Environment  
in an Era of Polarization and  
Conflicting Priorities



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

METHODOLOGY .....	2
INTRODUCTION .....	3
BACKGROUND .....	4
AMERICAN ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES SURVEY .....	5
I. Environmental Consensus Points .....	5
II. Environmental Differences: Political .....	6
III. Global Warming Findings .....	7
IV. AEVS Key Findings .....	8
V. Conclusions .....	15
SPONSORS .....	16
The Sierra Club	
Earthjustice	
ecoAmerica	

## METHODOLOGY

SRIC-BI and ecoAmerica developed and pre-tested a 240-item mail survey that focused on measuring first person attitudes and specific indicators. In addition, the survey included the VALS classification battery. The survey was then mailed to a nationally representative sample of American adults based on typical demographic targets drawn from the TNS/NFO panel. 1,506 completed questionnaires (40% response rate) were obtained. Results were clustered and correlated to develop actionable information on Americans' environmental perspectives and values.

The AEVS employs SRIC-BI's VALS research technology. VALS uses psychographic techniques to explore the psychology of Americans and uncover the motivations that underlie behaviors and opinions. It focuses on why Americans do the things they do



### **SRIC Consulting**

Contact: Bill Guns, President, [wguns@srlic-bi.com](mailto:wguns@srlic-bi.com) (650) 859-4600

SRIC Consulting–Business Intelligence is an international consumer research and consulting company with extensive expertise and unique tools that help clients expand their perspective and focus on effective strategies.

# The American Environmental Values Survey

## INTRODUCTION

The Dust Bowl, Love Canal, Three Mile Island, Exxon Valdez, lead poisoning, Agent Orange, DDT, and the American Bald Eagle. Americans can harm the environment. When the damage we do impacts us, we learn and take action. Unfortunately, these iconic examples are all decades old.

Current environmental crises like global warming, ecosystem collapse, ANWR and asthma are not as vivid. Vast, subtle and remote, they don't seem to affect our daily lives. They don't provide quick sound bites on cable news. And when they do make the news, professional naysayers dispute the findings and remind us of trade-offs. Meanwhile, a host of more pressing concerns, including war, energy prices, terrorism, health care and the economy clamor for attention.

"It is difficult to assess ecosystems effectively because many of the effects are slow to become apparent, because they may be expressed primarily at some distance from where the ecosystem was changed, and because the costs and benefits of changes often accrue to different sets of stakeholders."

UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment  
April 2005, page 23

Americans' active support for environmental protection has been steadily eroding. Participation in Earth Day events in America is down from 20,000,000 people in 1970 to less than 1,000,000 today. And while 77% of Americans say they worry about the environment a great deal or fair amount, for most of them it is neither a personal nor a public policy priority.

ecoAmerica conducted the AEVS in an attempt to understand this paradox, and to chart a path for building stronger public support for environmental protection. The survey found deep differences in the ways that distinct groups of Americans think about the environment. Some Americans, for example, understand the grave threat that global warming represents but they aren't worried about pollution in their neighborhoods – a problem that they think has been solved.

Other Americans don't understand global warming and are unwilling to support actions that involve higher taxes – or sacrifice of any kind – for an uncertain future benefit. But those same Americans are worried about the fact that many kids who play baseball seem to have asthma.

The main lesson of the AEVS is that a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. To build strong public support for environmental protection, advocates must segment the American public and engage specific audiences on the issues that are most likely to resonate with them, using messages tailored explicitly for their personality types.

# The American Environmental Values Survey

## BACKGROUND

The American Environmental Values Survey asked Americans about environmental issues, behaviors and concerns; other social and cultural issues; voting and political attitudes; and general attitudes and demographic questions.

The AEVS survey results below fall into two broad categories. Sections I - III of this document contain some **traditional attitudes and polling survey results**. These results highlight areas of agreement and disagreement on environmental issues among Americans, but provide limited understanding and leverage to advocates seeking to drive changes in behavior. For instance, while survey after survey reveals apparent broad support for environmental issues, these results do not correlate with the decline in environmental public policy support. The AEVS is designed to discover why.

The second category of results are the **psychographic results**. Using proven VALS psychographics, AEVS uncovers the cultural understanding - or lack thereof - that various groups of Americans have about the environment and about issues that impact environmental priorities. The findings do not emerge from any one specific response; rather, they emerge from the relationships of various responses in the data.

The VALS technology employed in the AEVS focuses on psychological traits that motivate Americans. Examining motivations helps us understand the why Americans believe what they believe and provides insight into the kinds of messages that will change attitudes and behaviors. Psychographic analysis uncovers the motivations of respondents using first person questions and a series of statistical analyses using statements like *"Pollution is a small price to pay for progress."*, *"Environmental regulations infringe too much on individual property rights."*, or *"Our country is in more danger from environmental hazards such as air pollution and global warming than it is from terrorists."*

This type of research is common in consumer marketing. Coupled with focused marketing programs, it drives brand development and purchasing behaviors. Applying psychographic research to causes or issues can yield similar results.

The American Environmental Values Survey provides a foundation for understanding environmental values and issues. The truths and principles embodied in these findings inform ecoAmerica's efforts to proactively and reactively redefine environmentalism and realign contemporary environmental values.

## The American Environmental Values Survey

### I. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSENSUS POINTS

	% that Agree	Some- what Agree	Agree	Total Agree
1. I love to be outdoors		23	70	93
2. Most kids do not spend enough time outdoors		21	71	92
3. Most kids these days care more about video games and portable music players than about wildlife and clean air		33	58	91
4. The beauty of nature is a gift from God		15	72	87
5. Additional taxes on gasoline would unfairly hurt poor people		23	64	87
6. I am concerned about environmental issues		45	41	86
7. Having a yard is important to me		34	52	86
8. Every town in America should have land with nature trails nearby		35	50	85
9. Poisons in the environment shorten our lives		37	47	84
10. We need laws to protect large animals from extinction		38	45	83
11. We can achieve environmental protection and economic growth at the same time		43	40	83
12. If we want to fight asthma, we need clean air		37	46	83
13. I worry about the effects of environmental pollution on my family's health		36	47	83
14. Our children's lives will be worse because of our generation's wasteful habits		40	42	82
15. Most environmentalists have good intentions		47	35	82
16. Most scientists have good intentions		47	34	81
17. Taking good care of nature is part of our duty to God		25	56	81
18. I make a strong effort to recycle everything I possibly can		32	48	80
19. I would love a two week trip into the mountains		24	56	80

The dominant theme here is that Americans care about the outdoors. 93% say they love to be outdoors. 92% think that children should spend more time outdoors, and 85% think that every town should have land with nature trails nearby.

The second theme is environmental concerns. Over 80% of Americans worry about the environment in general and specifically about poisons, extinction of large animals, asthma, health in general, and the well-being of future generations.

Perhaps surprisingly, 87% of Americans express concern about the impact of gas taxes on the poor and 83% believe that we can achieve environmental protection and economic growth at the same time.

## II. ENVIRONMENTAL DIFFERENCES: POLITICAL

The American Environmental Values Survey tracked environmental behaviors, issues, and attitudes along many dimensions, including age, gender, education, ethnic/racial group, income, and union membership. While Democrats, Republicans, and Independents share many environmental values, as documented in the previous section, the survey also revealed significant differences in environmental values and perspectives by political party.

In general, Republicans are less concerned about the environment, especially about global warming. They prioritize the economy more highly than environmental issues and trust environmentalists less. Independents aligned more closely with Democrats on all points except one – they concur with Republicans that environmentalists are somewhat impractical.

	Net Agrees %	Rep.	Dem.	Indep.	All
1. I am worried about the greenhouse effect (global warming)		63	84	79	73
2. Cars cause global warming		55	69	70	63
3. I support pollution standards even if it means shutting down some factories		48	66	64	57
4. I believe much of what environmentalists have to say		46	63	65	56
5. Protecting the environment should be given top priority even at the risk of curbing economic growth		45	65	63	56
6. I do not feel safe because of the chemicals in the environment		43	67	57	56
7. I prefer to buy a brand associated with an environmental cause even if it costs more		43	61	59	52
8. I would describe environmentalists as practical		41	58	46	48
9. I would call myself an environmentalist		37	54	52	45
10. Our country is in more danger from environmental hazards such as air pollution and global warming than it is from terrorists		32	58	49	45
11. I would describe environmentalists as self-righteous		55	38	44	44
12. Americans are responsible for most of the world's environmental problems		33	47	46	44
13. We need to stop global warming even if it means raising taxes		31	49	46	40
14. Too much fuss is made about global warming		55	24	31	37
15. Too much fuss is made about cruelty to animals		42	23	33	31
16. At present, the US government is doing enough to deal with environmental issues		43	23	28	30
17. Global warming will not affect me, in my lifetime		36	20	28	26
18. We must relax environmental standards in order to achieve economic growth		29	20	16	24
19. Environmental progress retards innovation		27	19	20	23

### III. GLOBAL WARMING FINDINGS

Most Americans believe global warming is happening and express concern about it. Most understand that human behavior contributes to global warming, but many do not believe their own behavior is a cause. According to AEVS data:

- 66% of Americans believe we can control global warming
- 66% believe it will impact them during their lifetimes
- 57% believe we are not doing enough to control it
- 45% believe global warming is a bigger threat to America than terrorism
- 40% would be willing to see taxes raised to address global warming

However, these statistics conceal major differences on the issue beyond the partisan differences noted in Section II. It's revealing to see how understanding and support for global warming solutions vary depending on an individual's psychographic profile.

A small segment of the American public, less than 15%, understands the causes of global warming and the seriousness of the threat. These Americans are well-educated, successful, and self-confident. They are much more likely to support aggressive action than the rest of the country.

Another similar-size psychographic group of younger, stimulus-seeking Americans, are concerned about global warming, but only half as likely as the first group to see global warming as mattering to them personally (19% vs. 39%). In addition, they're three times as likely to say that global warming is being over-hyped (46% vs. 17%)

Conservative, religious Americans are much less likely than other psychographic segments to understand the causes of global warming. Only 49% believe that cars are a factor, and only 46% will say that their behavior contributes to the problem. Among the well-educated, self-confident group, the respective numbers are 82% and 70%.

Blue-collar, psychologically self-sufficient Americans have a strong environmental ethic, which they would likely label as "conservation," but they are much less willing to accept tax increases to stop global warming. Only 9% of this group believes that increasing gas taxes would help reduce energy use and only 30% think raising taxes are necessary to address the issue. In the group of highly educated Americans, 40% believe gas taxes would reduce energy consumption and the vast majority 70% would accept a tax increase if it would help.

These differences are instructive in messaging global warming arguments. It may be possible to change attitudes, awareness and behaviors, but the most effective arguments must take these different audiences into account. For instance, messages that include a tax-based solution are likely to turn off as many people to global warming solutions as they will engage.

## The American Environmental Values Survey

### IV. KEY FINDINGS

Contemporary American environmental concerns usually do not translate into action. The American Environmental Values Survey and other research consistently document that more than three-quarters of Americans claim to be concerned or very concerned about the environment. Yet when compared with other issues such as the war in Iraq, terrorism, gasoline prices, illegal immigration and taxes, the environment does not rank among their top 20 concerns.

The AEVS was designed to diagnose the reasons for this dissonance and prescribe ways to resolve it. Responses to the survey were statistically analyzed as a whole, and also by psychographic groupings. This analysis yielded eleven key findings. The relevance of these findings varies significantly by psychographic and socio-economic factors. Understood in this context, the findings are leverage points that can be used to sway the environmental perspectives and behaviors of different groups of Americans.

The main lesson of the AEVS is that a one-size-fits-all approach won't work. To build strong public support for environmental protection, advocates must realize they are speaking to multiple audiences, and that each of these audiences has different values and priorities.

### The American Environmental Values Survey

#### Key findings

1. Americans' environmental concerns are divergent and polarized.
2. Libertarian values are ascendant over communal values.
3. Issue complexity has paralyzed many Americans.
4. Men and women have some very different environmental concerns.
5. Environmentalism is hampered by anti-science attitudes.
6. Indifference is a major factor among some groups of Americans.
7. Competing priorities affect all groups of Americans.
8. There are three major environmental issue groupings among Americans.
9. The pocketbook is the most powerful leverage point for changing personal behavior.
10. Environmental responsibility is getting more personal.
11. Environmentalism and environmentalists have an image problem.



## **1. Americans' environmental concerns are divergent and polarized.**

Americans' environmental concerns are divergent well beyond the political differences discussed in Section II of this report. There is no common agreement on what environmental concern means or what to do about it. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, different groups of Americans have different definitions for the word “environment.” Some Americans see hunting habitat, others see recreation areas for dirt biking, while many environmentalists see global ecosystems. Second, given these different concepts of the environment, Americans have very different views of events or decisions that affect the environment. To some, protecting wilderness means leaving it “untouched”; to others, it means keeping forests available for recreation.

Americans' understanding of environmental protection is fragmented and diffuse. Fundamentally, this lack of consensus translates into tension between these different groups. Because all of these groups tend to be hyper-sensitive to bias against their points of view, it's difficult for advocates to establish organizational and issue credibility across the board. These tensions about the environment very much reflect larger cultural tensions between, say, conservative and progressive values, or between socio-economic groups. Because of this fact, consensus regarding environmental issues is unlikely to prevail for quite some time.

## **2. Libertarian values are ascendant over communal values.**

In his book *All Together Now: Common Sense for a Fair Economy*, Economic Policy Institute advisor Jared Bernstein describes two competing themes in American culture that impact politics and the environment. Bernstein labels these themes “We're In This Together” (WITT) and “You're On Your Own” (YOYO). The former perspective emphasizes connection, community, safety nets and support. The latter is characterized by self reliance, taking charge, and individualism. The AEVS data indicates that the YOYO philosophy is much more appealing to Americans today.

WITT and YOYO values are deep-rooted and hard to change. The problem for the environmental movement is that WITT is at the heart of ecological thinking. The environmental movement needs to find ways to position the environment that tap into libertarian values (everyone for himself) instead of communal values if it wants to appeal to those who do not currently support environmental change.

### 3. Issue complexity has paralyzed many Americans.

Most Americans are not fully aware of our current environmental challenges because such awareness requires a high level of knowledge about environmental issues, a strong understanding of how the environment relates to the economy, and a long-range perspective. Inability to comprehend the issues and visualize future benefits prevents people from acting.

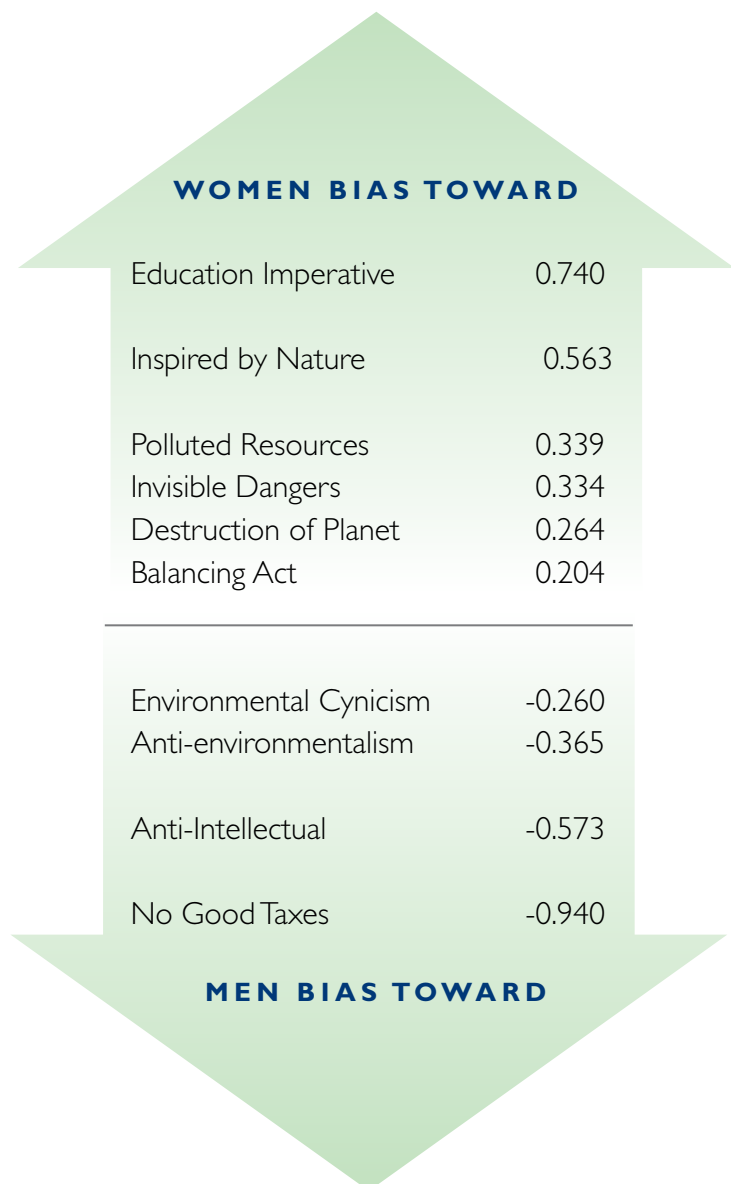
Given this lack of understanding, to expect most Americans to change their standard of living today for environmental benefits tomorrow is not realistic. To help people understand and support environmentally friendly policies, consider programs that personalize environmentalism: demonstrate 'costs' to families, or how much can be achieved through simple, incremental changes in personal behavior.

### 4. Men and women have some very different environmental concerns.

As a cultural idea, the environment is gendered, and the gap between male and female perspectives on the subject is large. It is “macho” to view environmentalists as self-righteous and “feminine” to view them as practical.

As the accompanying graphic illustrates, women are much more sensitive to environmental issues while men are more skeptical and concerned about trade-offs. Traditional environmental appeals are much more attractive to women than to men.

Environmentalists need to find new ways to reach out to men. One way might be to explore the connection between self-sufficiency and the environment. The ability to survive in the ruggedness of the great outdoors is part of the macho guy's self-image. Man as “protector,” a theme from the YOYO finding, might also be a possibility. Another potential messaging lever is to capitalize on the macho group's distinction between environmentalism and conservation.



## **5. Environmentalism is hampered by anti-science attitudes.**

Americans have a long tradition of skepticism about intellectuals. This skepticism is an easy way to refute an argument or point of view that you don't really want to hear. The AEVS data shows skepticism of science itself, as well as how it prioritizes 'facts' over religious or social concerns, is currently popular in today's culture. This skepticism of science extends to environmentalism in general.

It's important to refute anti-intellectual arguments, but not necessarily by using more scientific research -- making scientific arguments is not compelling to many Americans. Using humor and focusing skepticism back on those who fund these anti-intellectual arguments can help offset their effects.

## **6. Indifference is a major factor among some groups of Americans.**

In the AEVS study, indifference is characterized by a "so what, who cares" philosophy. Unlike anti-intellectualism, indifference is not pervasive throughout America, but it is apparent among lower income and less-educated groups. Indifference often manifests itself in economic terms, but not in a "jobs versus the environment" manner. Instead, the environmentally indifferent use their fatalistic attitude to sidestep economic responsibility for protecting the environment. "It's going to happen anyway," they say, "so why should I care?"

Because of this fatalistic attitude, which extends to other aspects of the culture as well, indifferent Americans are difficult to motivate. They will become galvanized only when and if environmentalism is adopted and supported by mainstream America and sufficient savings benefits for environmentally friendly behaviors can be demonstrated. Indifferent Americans are likely to be immune to images of environmental trauma and destruction.

## 7. Competing priorities affect all groups of Americans.

Even the most environmentally sympathetic people have competing priorities. For instance, the most pro-environmental Americans are also the most likely to prioritize education. Americans with the greatest love of the outdoors and a rugged conservationist spirit are those most likely to be hampered by financial woes and a disdain for taxes.

AEVS analysis of why Americans do not support environmental issues yielded nine competing priorities:

- Financial Woes (*I have trouble making ends meet*)
- Religious Values (*I try to follow Jesus' model*)
- Modernity (*environmentalism is old solutions to old problems, repeating mistakes*)
- Personal Safety (*I worry about myself or a family becoming a victim of crime*)
- No Good Taxes (*I think taxes never solve any problems*)
- Education Imperative (*using tax dollars fund education will better the economy*)
- Political Futility (*why worry about political issues, I can't do anything anyway*)
- Cynicism (*politicians and 'the system' are controlled by special interest groups*)

Instead of trying to compete with these priorities, advocates should try to incorporate them as much as possible in efforts to build support for environmental concerns. For instance, good environmental policy can be cast as a personal safety issue, or as an important religious value.

## 8. There are three major environmental issue groupings among Americans.

While most Americans don't make connections between distinct but ultimately interconnected environmental issue, the AEVS shows that people do tend to group individual issues into three primary clusters:

**Destruction of the Planet:** A concern for the destruction of natural and wilderness areas, food chains, rainforests, ozone, and extinction of endangered species. These issues are conceptual and global; most Americans cannot relate to them. These issues are most effective for use with well-educated, successful, and self-confident segments of the American public.

**Polluted Resources:** A concern for polluted resources (water, air, soil), pesticides in food, nuclear waste disposal, and toxic waste. These are more visible, easier to understand, and more accepted issues among most Americans. (One barrier: some groups believe pollution problems have been solved.) Focusing on polluted resources is most effective in messaging to lower-income, less educated and self-confident Americans.

**Human Ecology:** A concern for uniquely human challenges such as traffic congestion, population growth, noise pollution, and urban sprawl. All Americans relate to these issues.

The implication of this finding is that environmental issues should not be intermixed. Most Americans have difficulty making connections between cause and effect, much less linking various complex issues together. Creating messages within issue clusters will work, but creating messages across issue clusters will only be understood by the most sophisticated.

## **9. Pocketbook environmentalism.**

Capitalizing on consumer behavior is a highly effective route to changing environmental awareness attitudes and behavior. While many Americans are unresponsive to direct environmental appeals, most are immediately concerned about pocketbook issues. Home-based behavior that can save money, such as installing insulation or using smart settings for the thermostat, is a relatively powerful motivator. Also, some groups of Americans are motivated by the total cost of ownership over the lifetime of products and services.

“Value” segments, or people who are motivated by low-cost, hassle-free products and services, will grow in the coming years, as more Americans spend greater portions of their disposable income on health care and commodities. In addition to pointing out the savings and benefits of environmental actions, it would be helpful to make Americans aware (in creative ways) of the hidden costs in products and services that are not environmentally friendly.

## **10. Environmental responsibility is getting more personal.**

Traditional concern for the environment arose out of broad social movements. It is evolving into a more individualistic and emotional concern. At this time, however, few Americans embrace personal responsibility for the environment. However, those who recognize and accept responsibility for their contribution to the problem typically comprise the trend leaders in our society.

Responsibility as a theme could be useful as a communications concept among more highly educated Americans. It could also be used to target other groups by tapping into aspects of their self-image. For example, environmental responsibility can be positioned as a smart thing to do, or as a hallmark of leadership.

## **II. Environmentalism and environmentalists have an image problem.**

Eco-terrorism? Soy and granola? Partisan liberals? Regulations with huge taxpayer costs.? No matter how you look at it, America's environmentalists have an image problem. They have disconnected with Americans, or Americans have disconnected with them. The AEVS also revealed that many Americans view the environmental movement as traditional, dated, and somewhat out of touch with current society.

The result? Only a very small percentage of Americans are consciously and comprehensively environmentally active, or would boycott a company's products because of their position on the environment. Overall, only 44% of Americans would be willing to label themselves as "environmentalists."

Environmental advocates would help advance their cause if they could become perceived as part of or leading mainstream America, rather than on its fringe. They should consider more relating strongly to other American groups and values. Embedding these attitudes into leadership, staff and volunteers at environmental organizations, as well as in all their communications efforts, will help them gain greater public support for their initiatives.

## The American Environmental Values Survey

### V. CONCLUSIONS

The debate on global warming is at an inflection point. Instead of questioning the validity and causes of climate change, those who would like to ignore the problem now offer social and economic arguments against making changes. The debate over California's AB32 bill was more about economic impact than science. Pat Robertson and, it is rumored, George W. Bush are reversing their positions about the reality of global warming.

This is progress but not victory. No longer able to cast doubt about the science, the forces that have impeded progress on global warming will try to shift the arguments to taxes, economic and business costs, mitigation of impacts, and the hopelessness of the situation. They will continue to delay and dilute meaningful action.

But as the climate change debate shifts from issues to values, it's worth reflecting on what we might have learned over the past decade. If we had it to do over again, how would we change our strategies and tactics to achieve stronger impact more quickly? How can we apply that learning to the next phase of the debate?

Since George Lakoff published *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't* just over a decade ago, progressives have known that they are losing the values debate, and thereby losing issues debates and elections. Beyond some subjective notions about "framing," however, solutions to this problem have been scarce.

The American Environmental Values Survey provides some insights into how to use values as tools to increase awareness and change the attitudes and behaviors of the American public. The creation of a values majority for the environment starts with the realization that Americans are not one homogeneous mass. We are a collection of divergent, sometimes polarized groups, each with different perspectives and priorities. We don't all belong to the same religion, live in the same small town, watch the same television programs, or worry about the environment.

Environmentalists could be much more effective by tailoring messages to specific groups of Americans in the same that any for-profit company targets products and advertising to different audiences. We can convince farmers in Iowa, Baptists in Birmingham, Latinos in Los Angeles, and mothers in Milwaukee of the importance and need for action on environmental issues. One universal message to all of these groups will not only be less effective than tailored marketing based on their concerns, it may well turn off as many people as it motivates.

The AEVS provides a foundation for further research and action on local, regional and national environmental issues of all kinds. Identifying the most influential and the most influence-able constituencies, and then developing and deploying messages based on their values, will produce the quickest, most effective results.

## SPONSORS

The American Environmental Values Survey assesses contemporary environmental values and motivations in the United States. Its purpose is to provide information and insights to environmental advocates who want to increase the effectiveness of their targeting and messaging efforts. AEVS was initiated by ecoAmerica, conducted by SRIC-BI, and sponsored by the Sierra Club, Earthjustice, and ecoAmerica.



### **The Sierra Club**

**Contact:** Eric Antebi, National Press Secretary, [eric@sierraclub.org](mailto:eric@sierraclub.org) (415) 977-5500

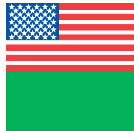
The Sierra Club is America's oldest, largest, and most influential grassroots environmental organization. Inspired by nature, the Club's 750,000 members work together to protect our communities and the planet.



### **Earthjustice**

**Contact:** Cara Pike, VP, Communications, [cpike@earthjustice.org](mailto:cpike@earthjustice.org) (510) 550-6700

Earthjustice is a non-profit public interest law firm dedicated to protecting the magnificent places, natural resources, and wildlife of this earth and to defending the right of all people to a healthy environment.



### **ecoAmerica**

**Contact:** Lee Bodner, Executive Director, [lee@ecoamerica.net](mailto:lee@ecoamerica.net) (301) 379-4200

ecoAmerica is a non-profit environmental research and marketing firm dedicated to making sustainable support for our natural heritage a personal and public policy priority amongst environmentally agnostic Americans.

**ecoAmerica**  
evolving environmentalism

ecoAmerica is a new, 501(c)(3) non-profit consumer research and marketing organization dedicated to reengaging environmentally agnostic Americans in supporting sustainability and protecting our natural heritage as a personal and public policy priority. We use psychographic research that identifies deeply held values of Americans and develop state-of-the-art, innovative marketing initiatives to drive changes in awareness, attitudes and behaviors.

Lee Bodner	Executive Director	<a href="mailto:lee@ecoAmerica.net">lee@ecoAmerica.net</a>	(301) 379-4200
Colleen Schell	V.P. Marketing	<a href="mailto:colleen@ecoAmerica.net">colleen@ecoAmerica.net</a>	(415) 225-8639
Jennifer Cox	V.P. Development	<a href="mailto:jennifer@ecoAmerica.net">jennifer@ecoAmerica.net</a>	(202) 271-5675
Robert M. Perkowitz	Chairman	<a href="mailto:bob@ecoAmerica.net">bob@ecoAmerica.net</a>	(704) 904-6720

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