



Backgrounder for Press Conference

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Key findings and implications of our 2009 Environmental Education Poll

The following text (in black) is excerpted verbatim from a separate 43 page report prepared by Ipsos Reid, entitled “Provincial Polling on Environmental Education and Market-Based Instruments¹.” Text in blue describes the implications of these findings.

Finding: 75% of Albertans agreed with the statement “Schools in Alberta should give top priority to providing students with opportunities to do environmental action projects.”

- Support for K to 12 students’ involvement in neighbourhood clean-ups is near universal (90% support, 3% oppose). Strong support is also expressed for K to 12 students educating others about local environmental issues (78% support, 6% oppose) and reviewing the operation of a business to see how they can be more environmentally friendly (73% support, 9% oppose). Just slightly lower is support for presenting to politicians on an environmental issue (67% support, 11% oppose).

Implications: there would be widespread support from Albertans for public policy initiatives that provide opportunities for learners to do a wide variety of environmental action projects. Given the current economic crisis, action projects that focus on the conservation of energy and water might be particularly well received.

¹ This report can be viewed at <http://abcee.org/about-us/polling>

Finding: Albertans knowledge of personal action skills is quite high, whereas knowledge of public action skills is markedly low.

- Albertans do not feel they know enough to communicate their environmental concerns to a political representative (31% knowledgeable); write an effective letter to the editor about an environmental issue (29% knowledgeable); and organize community action to protect their local environment (18% knowledgeable).

Paralleling knowledge, engagement in environmental behaviours in and around the home is quite high whereas engagement in public actions is quite low. It is important to note that both knowledge of action skills and environmental engagement tends to be lower among Albertans aged 18 to 34; making them a prime target for education.

- The majority of Albertans are actively engaged in maximizing energy efficiency in their home, reducing water consumption, and reducing household waste, while engagement in encouraging workplace environmental practices is moderate. In stark contrast, 70% do not communicate their environmental concerns to a political representative, 78% do not write letters to the editor and 78% do not organize community action.

Implications: peer-reviewed research suggests that knowledge of actions skills is an important precursor to engagement in environmental behaviours. Environmental education efforts that increase Albertans' **public** action skills would have a positive impact on their engagement in public action; and a focus on high school and youth audiences has a great potential to bring about new behaviours in this age group.

Finding: Most Albertans lack knowledge around the relative impacts and benefits of different environmental behaviours. For example, the perceived importance of and engagement in recycling among Albertans seems disproportionately high compared to other environmental behaviours.

- Just over half of Albertans (53%) think that 'recycling all your paper and tins helps the environment more than moving to a smaller more fuel-efficient home', although 37% recognize that the statement is false.

Implication: Albertans need to understand that recycling won't 'save the earth;' indeed, recycling isn't even on the science-based list of top consumer activities to minimize impact². Albertans and the environment would both benefit if the environmental education community were to educate around the relative impacts of consumer activities.

² *The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices*, Union of Concerned Scientists, 1999.

Finding: Albertans agree with all five goals of environmental education assessed – knowledge, issues, appreciation of nature, citizenship skills and action projects.

There is widespread (77-88%) agreement among Albertans that environmental education should help learners increase their environmental knowledge, understand environmental issues, appreciate nature, and build citizenship skills that help them solve environmental issues.

Implications: there would be strong support for government policy that built environmental education into formal and non-formal education.

Finding: Overall, environmental attitudes and values of Albertans support environmental initiatives and government actions, and Albertans recognize the impact of the environment on their personal lives.

- The environment and the economy: Albertans do not agree that the environment and the economy need to be traded off, nor do they agree the economy takes precedence over the environment even given the current global crisis.
- Environmental actions and restrictions: Albertans agree government action is needed to solve environmental problems including urban sprawl. At a collective level, Albertans recognize a need for action; conservatism does not rule the day.
- Personal impact of environmental issues: Albertans clearly acknowledge the link between the environment and their health, and believe that environmental issues will negatively impact the next generation, though not themselves to the same extent.
- Motivations and barriers to environmental behaviour: Albertans agree that hearing about solutions to environmental problems gives them hope. Most do not feel that lack of environmental knowledge is a barrier to environmental stewardship.

Implication: Albertans are looking for and would support strong government action to protect the environment. Environmental education efforts should include and emphasize compelling stories of solutions to environmental problems.

Other findings from our 2009 Environmental Education Poll

In general, Albertans do not feel they know a great deal about the five environmental issues evaluated, with knowledge about endangered species quite low.

- Less than half of Albertans provide ratings of 4 or 5 (on a 1 to 5 scale where 1 means you know very little and 5 means you know a great deal) on any of the issues and problems evaluated: global climate change (45%), urban sprawl around Alberta towns

and cities (42%), pollution of water in Alberta (33%), scarcity of water in some parts of Alberta (32%) and endangered species in Alberta (29%).

Most Albertans lack knowledge around the relative impacts and benefits of different environmental behaviours.

- Just over half of Albertans (53%) think that ‘recycling all your paper and tins helps the environment more than moving to a smaller more fuel-efficient home’, although 37% recognize that the statement is false.

The vast majority of Albertans feel they are doing a good job when it comes to protecting the environment, but recognize they could be doing more.

- While overall, 88% of Albertans say they are doing a good job of protecting the environment, just 22% say they are doing a *very* good job, while two-thirds (66%) say they are only doing a *somewhat* good job; thus recognizing that they could be doing more.

A sizeable gap exists between perceived personal performance and perceived performance of individual Albertans, suggesting that many Albertans may feel that they do more than their share.

- Just six-in-ten (61%) Albertans rate the performance of individual Albertans as a whole as *very* good (8%) or *somewhat* good (53%), giving more credit to themselves than to others.

Eight-in-ten Albertans are confident that their actions to protect the environment do indeed make a difference.

- Three-in-ten (28%) Albertans say they are *very* confident that their personal actions make a difference, while another half (52%) say they are *somewhat* confident.

Environmental responsibility within companies and corporations is important to many Albertans.

- A strong majority (69%) of Albertans agree that private companies and corporations should train their employees to solve environmental problems (just 10% disagree).

Albertans identify lack of interest, lack of time, access to natural areas, lack of parental involvement, weather and safety as the main barriers to children spending more time in nature.

About our Polling

- The overall purpose of the research was to better understand the public’s awareness and understanding of key environmental issues, as well as their overall level of engagement and readiness to practice environmental stewardship.

- Polling firm Ipsos Reid conducted a telephone survey with a random sample of 801 Albertans aged 18 or older between January 12th and 21st, 2009.
- a multi-stakeholder advisory committee helped design the poll
- Final data were weighted to ensure the overall sample's regional and age/gender composition reflects that of the actual Alberta population aged 18 or older
- The margin of error for the total sample of 801 is ± 3.5 % points, 19 times out of 20.

About proposed changes to the Elementary Science Curriculum

- Alberta Education is the lead agency (Minister is the Honorable Dave Hancock)
- There are approximately 45,000 students in each elementary Grade – and the document encompassed from Kindergarten to Grade 6. As such, the document will determine the science learning of over 300,000 Alberta students per year, over a period of at least ten years
- The environmental education community has been busy discussing the content of the new elementary science curriculum. ACEE organized a series of workshops on this topic in March 2009, attended by 50 professionals representing 36 environmental education stakeholder groups
- Groups liked many elements of the curriculum, but identified seven areas of improvement:
 1. More student action.
 2. Increase climate change content.
 3. Teach about biodiversity and how to protect it
 4. More emphasis on water and watersheds.
 5. Strengthen outdoor education.
 6. Ensure the use of positive language.
 7. Work with the environmental education community.
- More: <http://abcee.org/get-involved/science>

About environmental education, and ACEE

- **Definition of environmental education:** a learning process that increases peoples' knowledge and awareness about the environment, develops the necessary skills and expertise to address environmental challenges, and fosters attitudes, motivation, and commitment to make informed decisions and take responsible action.
- The Alberta Council for Environmental Education (ACEE) has the mission of working collaboratively to advance environmental education in Alberta.
- It was founded in 2005, and is a not-for-profit organization with charitable status
- An eight-member board represents different Alberta regions and stakeholder interests
- Accomplishments include the 'Framework to Advance Environmental Education in Alberta,' conferences, leadership clinics and workshops for the environmental education community, and a searchable database.
- For more information: <http://abcee.org>

About the elementary students' action project

- This is an extracurricular project run by a teacher, Laura Lea Sharp, at University Elementary School (Calgary Board of Education), for a group of Grade 5/6 students
- Students created the Kids Can Conserve leadership group, and focus on energy conservation. Find out more at the student-created website: <http://www.kidscanconserve.ca>
- Clearly, this program helps the environment and provides exciting learning opportunities – BUT only a small percentage of the 45,000 students in each Grade ever get a chance to ‘roll up their sleeves’ and take on action projects of this kind.
- ACEE would like to see opportunities for action more deeply woven into policies, such as the proposed new elementary science curriculum

Biographies of speakers

Brant Parker is an educator passionate about supporting teachers to advance teaching practice and providing students with learning experiences that are consistent with the diverse, interdependent and rapidly changing digital world they live in. He has over 25 years experience teaching and leading innovation in both the K-12 education and technology sectors. Brant currently works with the Calgary Board of Education and is Principal of University School, as well as Dr Gordon Townsend School which operates out of the Alberta Children's Hospital. He is also co-founder of School Soft Inc., an Alberta-based company which has developed a web-based solution for the scheduling of parent-teacher conferences.

Karsten Heuer is a University of Calgary trained wildlife biologist who works as a seasonal park warden in Canadian national parks. He is also an author who, for the past decade, has spent much of his time following some of North America's most endangered wildlife on foot and skis. In 1998 and 1999 he walked and skied from Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming to Canada's Yukon Territory, and told the story of the Y2Y Conservation Initiative). In 2003, he again set off on skis and foot with his wife, Leanne Allison, and, for five months, followed the Porcupine Caribou Herd from their Yukon winter range to their endangered Alaskan calving grounds and back. And in their latest project – ‘Finding Farley’ – he and his partner Leanne Allison **and** their two-and-a-half-year-old toddler, Zev, paddled, walked, and sailed across the prairies, barrenlands and Maritimes to visit the Canadian icon Farley Mowat.

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