

LET'S CLEAR THE AIR



Air quality social research backgrounder

Where do NSW residents stand on air quality?

This collection of research findings is a summary extract from DECCW research from 1997–2007. Educators, media and communicators can develop a deeper understanding of attitudes and behaviours towards air quality in NSW. See published documents for more information.

Attitudes

- Air quality was found to be the **second most important environmental issue** for the people of NSW in the *Who cares about the environment?* surveys of 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2006. The proportion of people concerned was well below those concerned about water issues and **dropped in each survey** (from 32 per cent in 1997 to 20 per cent in 2006).
- In 2007, air quality issues ranked third behind water supply/conservation and climate change, with 17 per cent of people nominating it as an issue.
- **Residents of Sydney** were much more likely to consider air pollution as one of the two most important environmental issues compared to all other areas in NSW (24 per cent in 2006, 19 per cent in 2007). In 2006, residents in inner urban Local Government Areas nominated this issue most (30 per cent). Outside Sydney, the region with people most likely to nominate air pollution as an issue was the south-eastern region (16 per cent). For all other regions, 6–14 per cent mentioned this issue.
- **People from non-English speaking backgrounds** were more likely to nominate air pollution/air quality as an important environmental issue (28 per cent compared to 19 per cent of those of English-speaking background in 2006), including motor vehicle emissions (14 per cent compared to 7 per cent). However, priority given to air issues has dropping for more than a decade. In 1996, air was the top issue (56 per cent) in specific ethnic communities research. This dropped to 30 per cent in 2004, then 28 per cent in *Who cares about the environment? 2006*.
- For those flagging air pollution or quality in both 2006 and 2007, this appears to have been based on **practical concerns** such as quality of life, eg. those living in a location with higher levels of air pollution. Findings from 2007 suggest that people are more likely to become engaged with air pollution as an issue of concern due to health or aesthetic concerns.
- People who mention air pollution as the most important issue are **less likely to mention climate change** as their second issue and vice versa, with air pollution as a more concrete and local issue, and climate change a broader and more abstract issue.



Environment,
Climate Change
& Water



our environment *it's a living thing*

- Although some people simultaneously used the terms greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution together in relation to vehicles, the generic term 'emissions' was more commonly used, as was 'air pollution' as a separate term ie. it did not appear to be commonly known that vehicle emissions contain both air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.
- In both 2006 and 2007, 5 per cent of people in the *Who cares about the environment?* surveys nominated air quality initiatives as the most important thing the state government could do to protect the environment. Air quality was the 4th most mentioned issue and the 6th rated initiative in 2006, dropping to the 5th issue and 8th rated initiative in 2007.

Perception of improvement or deterioration in air quality issues

- Since the *Who Cares about the environment?* research began in 1994, **perceptions of some air quality measures have been relatively stable**. About one quarter (22–29 per cent) have consistently seen improvements in general quality of the air over the previous three years, 33–40 per cent have seen deterioration, and 28–38 per cent seeing no change.
- There has been significant change in community perceptions since 2000 regarding **encouraging alternatives to motor vehicles** where **perception of improvement almost halved** (from 46 per cent in 2000 to 26 per cent in 2006) and perception of deterioration almost doubled (19 per cent to 36 per cent in 2006).
- **Sydney residents were more likely to think air quality had deteriorated** (41 per cent compared to 21–30 per cent in other areas) and that encouraging alternatives to motor vehicles had become worse (40 per cent compared to 26–33 per cent in other areas).
- **Younger people** (aged 15–24) were more likely to think there had been improvements in using alternatives to motor vehicles (43 per cent compared to 19–25 per cent).
- **Those with strongly pro-environmental views** were much more likely to view air quality as getting worse (52 per cent compared to 24–34 per cent in all other groups). They were also more likely to take active steps to reduce fuel consumption and vehicle air pollution.
- In DECCW focus groups, people talked about **air pollution as a visible problem**, seen to be worse in certain weather conditions ('still days'), and most noticeable for those whose dwellings or drive patterns have a distant view of the city. The main causes of air pollution were said to be transport, industry and bushfires/dust storms. Overall, air pollution was acknowledged but **not considered a pressing problem**.

Behaviours

- Those who reported often **reducing fuel consumption jumped by 10 per cent** from 38 per cent in the 2003 *Who cares about the environment?* survey to 48 per cent in 2006 but dropped back to 44 per cent in 2007, reflecting general changes in petrol prices at the times of the surveys.
- Only 28 per cent of respondents said they often tried to reduce their fuel use in both the 2006 and 2007 *Who Cares?* surveys.
- Compared to many other pro-environmental behaviours, a **high proportion** of respondents in *Who Cares?* surveys have **never tried to reduce fuel consumption**, though this is decreasing: 24 per cent in 2003, 18 per cent in 2006 and 17 per cent in 2007.
- **Saving money** was the most common reason given for reducing fuel consumption (51 per cent in 2006, dropping to 47 per cent in 2007).
- Focus group research revealed **people find it difficult to see how they could make a difference** to such a broad/widespread problem. Behaviours that reduce air pollution are generally undertaken for other reasons eg. bike riding for fitness and health, reducing car/fuel use for cost-saving reasons, changing to a cleaner vehicle for health reasons.
- **13 per cent of households in NSW do not have a vehicle**. While this has declined since 1996 (from 16.8 per cent), it is the highest of all Australian states and territories.
- Of 12 factors to consider **in buying a car, environmental impact rates lowest** and is dropping (5 per cent in 2003, only 2.4 per cent in 2006) but factors that impact air quality (vehicle size and fuel costs) are second and third after purchase price.

- **19 per cent of people in NSW use public transport to get to work or study**, the highest proportion for any Australian state or territory. In particular, NSW has the highest use of trains (12 per cent). NSW also has the highest use of public transport for non-work trips (18 per cent). Reasons for using public transport are practical, ie. cost, convenience and time-related, not environmental concerns. Reasons for not taking public transport are predominantly lack of services or timing of services (total 51 per cent); 23 per cent prefer the comfort, convenience and privacy of their own vehicle.
- **6 per cent cycle or walk to work**, mainly because they work close enough to home. Distance is the major reason (73 per cent) given for not walking or cycling to work or study.

Sources

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