

ENVIRONMENTAL LITERACY

In many areas of public discourse, the term activist has come to be confused with the term expert. Having an opinion, and the willingness to express it loudly, is often confused with expertise.

In the State of Minnesota, officials are grappling with the need to have an environmental education program that will meet public interest requirements. A starting point was to determine levels of knowledge shared by citizens about the environment. This was the basis for conducting the second annual survey on environmental literacy in the state. For the purposes of the survey, environmental literacy is defined as “an environmentally literate person must understand the relationship of the parts of a system and the interdependence of human and environmental systems.”

To collect the data for the survey, more than 1,000 people were asked 13 fact-based questions, many of the questions having six parts or more, to determine “what they actually know about the environment.” The survey was designed by a non-partisan group of educators, government officials and conservation organizations, as well as opinion leaders.

It was found that while 60 per cent of Minnesota adults believe they are knowledgeable about the environment, only 47 per cent achieved scores indicating above-average knowledge on environmental matters. An ‘A’ rating was given to those who answered 7 out of the 13 questions correctly, and only 11 per cent received this level. Almost 32 per cent of the state’s adults have below-average knowledge about the environment according to the survey.

In a State where water quality and water usage are burning political issues, 45 per cent of the adults have an average knowledge on water issues and a quarter received a failing grade.

wetlands not understood

When asked how they themselves rate their knowledge of environmental issues, a surprising result was the low scores for sustainability and biodiversity, where 20 per cent and 14 per cent respectively of respondents felt they were informed in these areas.

In terms of attitudes towards laws and regulations, only 11 per cent of respondents felt the laws had gone too far while in the past two years there has been a jump from 10 per cent to 58 per cent of the public believing that regulations affecting air pollution haven’t gone far enough.

Asked who should have primary responsibility for solving environmental problems, 33 per cent of residents believe it's up to individual citizens followed by government at 29 per cent, agriculture and forestry at 24 per cent, and business and industry at 23 per cent. A majority of the people in the State, 90 per cent, want their schools to provide environmental education. On the matter of support for environmental action, 20 per cent reported that they donate money to environmental organizations more than once a year while 34 per cent responded that they donate once a year.



Regarding the male/female split, males scored higher than females in most of the responses in terms of environmental knowledge, a finding consistent with environmental literacy surveys conducted nation wide, but females tend to have a more positive attitude toward the environment compared to males.

The range of topics covered in the factual

knowledge questions covered a number of areas. Respondents were given a list of choices to identify the biggest source of pollution in streams and rivers, they were asked to identify the largest source of electricity generation in the State, to select the largest source of carbon monoxide, to identify from a list the contribution made by wetlands and to select the main cause of global climate change.