

## **Top Environmental Priorities Should be Air and Water Pollution**

*Just under half of Americans have changed their lifestyle to become more environmentally sustainable*

**ROCHESTER, N.Y. and WASHINGTON, D.C. – April 24, 2009** – As another Earth Day passes by, a majority of Americans say that they are paying attention to environmental issues, but only three in ten or less are paying a great deal of attention to these issues. Three in ten are paying a great deal of attention to air pollution (31%), water pollution (30%) and water shortages (29%) with one-quarter (25%) of Americans saying they pay a great deal of attention to combating global warming. Only two in ten adults say they pay a great deal of attention to the extinction of certain species (21%), deforestation (21%) and reducing Americans' carbon footprint (20%).

These are some of the results of a new **BBC World News America/The Harris Poll** of 2,123 adults surveyed online between April 6 and 8, 2009.

Among these different environmental issues, some are higher priorities than others. When asked which two issues government officials should make their top priority, two in five adults say air pollution (42%) and water pollution (40%). One third say combating global warming (34%) and water shortages (34%) while lesser numbers say reducing Americans' carbon footprint (18%), deforestation (16%) and the extinction of certain species (11%) should be top priority.

Different regions have different environmental priorities. Due to recent droughts, a plurality of Westerners (44%) say water shortages should be the top priority for government officials to address. Almost half of Midwesterners (47%) believe air pollution should be a top priority as do 45% of Easterners.

### **Being Environmentally Sustainable**

When being environmentally sustainable is defined as "taking from the earth only what it can provide indefinitely, thus leaving future generations as much as we have access to ourselves", just under half of Americans (48%) say they have done something to make their lifestyle more environmentally sustainable while one-quarter say they have not (27%) and are not sure (26%). Last year over half (53%) of Americans say they had made changes to their lifestyle to be more environmentally sustainable, while 25% had not and 22% were not sure. Again there are regional differences and those in the West are more likely to say they have made changes (52%) while those in the East are less likely to say they made changes (44%).

When it comes to what changes people have made, certain things are done more than others to make one's life environmentally sustainable:

- More than four in five adults who have made changes are recycling (85%), a high number but down from 91% who said they were recycling last year;

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- Seven in ten (71%) are paying bills online and/or receiving paperless statements, not very different from the 73% who said this last year;
- About half of those who are making changes are buying more locally produced food and/or goods (53%, up from 49% last year), bringing their own bags to stores (51% up from 39%) and buying green household products (50%, up from 47%);
- Under two in five people who have made changes are installing resource friendly appliances (39% down from 46% last year), buying more used products (37% up from 31% last year) and discontinuing purchases of plastic water bottles (37% up from 30%); and,
- Some other changes people have made are to compost (27% up from 23%), carpooling (14% down from 16%) and buying a hybrid car (5% up from 3%).

**So What?**

With the economy in turmoil, people may be making the more economical decisions, rather than those leading to a more environmentally sustainable life. This could be seen in the small drop in people who say they are making changes in their lifestyle. But as the economy improves, with the attention on things like bringing bags to stores and discontinuing the use of plastic water bottles, the number of people making these changes should be growing. It might also be that the little everyday things people are doing are making a difference – but Americans don’t think they are enough to say they are making lifestyle changes.

**TABLE 1**  
**ATTENTION PAID TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

“Turning now to the environment, how much attention do you pay to the following environmental issues?”

Base: All U.S. adults

	ATTENTION (NET)	A great deal of attention	Some attention	NO ATTENTION (NET)	Not that much attention	No attention at all	Not at all sure
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Water pollution	77	30	47	20	13	7	3
Air pollution	75	31	44	22	15	7	3
Water shortages	71	29	42	26	18	8	3
Combating global warming	63	25	38	33	18	15	4
Extinction of certain species	62	21	41	34	23	11	4
Deforestation	60	21	39	35	23	12	5
Reducing Americans’ carbon footprint	58	20	38	37	20	17	5

Note: Percentages may not add up to 100%39 due to rounding

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**TABLE 2  
PRIORITY OF ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

“Thinking of the same list, while all are important, which two do you think government officials should make their top priority? Please select up to two responses.”

Base: All U.S. adults

	Total	Region				Age			
		East	Midwest	South	West	18-34	35-44	45-54	55+
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	
Air pollution	42	45	47	38	39	39	38	47	43
Water pollution	40	41	45	41	34	34	36	43	46
Combating global warming	34	37	31	35	33	33	37	34	33
Water shortages	34	26	27	38	44	30	30	35	38
Reducing Americans' carbon footprint	18	22	16	17	19	21	21	16	15
Deforestation	16	17	20	13	17	18	21	13	14
Extinction of certain species	11	10	10	13	8	16	12	10	5

Note: Multiple responses allowed

**TABLE 3  
MAKING LIFESTYLE MORE ENVIRONMENTALLY SUSTAINABLE**

“When we discuss the phrase environmental sustainability, we mean “taking from the earth only what it can provide indefinitely, thus leaving future generations as much as we have access to ourselves.” Using this definition, have you done anything to change your lifestyle to make it more environmentally sustainable?”

Base: All adults

	2008	2009	Region			
			East	Midwest	South	West
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Yes	53	48	44	48	47	52
No	25	27	26	26	28	25
Not sure	22	26	30	26	25	22

Note: Percentages may not add up exactly to 100% due to rounding.

**TABLE 4**  
**CHANGES MADE TO LIFESTYLE**

“What have you done to change your lifestyle to make it more environmentally sustainable?  
Please select all that apply.”

Base: Have Changed Lifestyle

	2008	2009
	%	%
Recycling	91	85
Paying bills online and/or receiving paperless statements	73	71
Buying more locally produced food and/or goods	49	53
Bringing my own bags to stores instead of using paper or plastic ones	39	51
Buying green household products	47	50
Installing resource friendly appliances	46	39
Buying more used products	31	37
Discontinuing purchases of plastic water bottles	30	37
Composting	23	27
Taking fewer airplane flights	22	22
Carpooling	16	14
Commuting to work in a way other than an automobile	16	12
Have considered/have become a vegetarian	10	11
Purchased a hybrid car	3	5
Other	14	12

Note: Multiple Responses Allowed

### Methodology

This **BBC World News America/The Harris Poll** was conducted online within the United States April 6 and 8, 2009 among 2,123 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents’ propensity to be online.

All sample surveys and polls, whether or not they use probability sampling, are subject to multiple sources of error which are most often not possible to quantify or estimate, including sampling error, coverage error, error associated with nonresponse, error associated with question wording and response options, and post-survey weighting and adjustments. Therefore, Harris Interactive avoids the words “margin of error” as they are misleading. All that can be calculated are different possible sampling errors with different probabilities for pure, unweighted, random samples with 100% response rates. These are only theoretical because no published polls come close to this ideal.

Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in Harris Interactive surveys. The data have been weighted to reflect the composition of the adult population. Because the sample is based on those who agreed to participate in the Harris Interactive panel, no estimates of theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

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