

*DO WE REALLY VALUE NATURE, OR DO WE MERELY WORRY ABOUT
OURSELVES?*

*(A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF SOME FINDINGS FROM PUBLIC OPINION POLLS AND
A SMALL-SCALE SURVEY)*

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It would be no exaggeration to say that all of us would like to live in a healthy natural environment, enjoy lush greenery and beautiful flowers in the summer or white snow in the winter, hear birds chirping in the morning, breathe clean air and drink clear water, as well as have enough opportunities for rest and recuperation. It is therefore not surprising that we feel uncomfortable or stressed and often get sick in an environment which is far from being healthy.

It is natural for us to worry about our well-being if the condition of our locality is changing for the worse. We respond to such a change in different ways: by distancing ourselves from some negative effects (e.g. moving to a cleaner or quieter neighbourhood), seeking help from relevant authorities (e.g. when it comes to cutting down trees), taking to the streets to call for a ban on the construction of a skyscraper or to protest against the launch of a nuclear power plant, etc. Some people think not only of the environmental factors that may affect their health but also about their own impact on the environment. They often break their old habits and espouse new practices for a better life and a healthier planet.

This short research paper focuses on how Ukrainians perceive environmental issues and what eco-friendly practices our fellow citizens are ready to take up. For this purpose, we will first analyse basic findings from several nationwide surveys carried out by different research institutions (or polling companies) from 2015

through 2020 ($N = 1,200\text{--}2,100$). In these surveys, a respondent was supposed to answer the following questions: a) which environmental problems (given on the list) worry him/her the most; b) who should be held responsible for such a state of affairs (the government, local authorities, politicians, big businesses, ordinary citizens, etc.); c) what the respondent is personally willing to do (or doing at the moment) in order to improve the current situation or tackle the environmental crisis. The data were gathered from all Ukraine's regions, except for the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and non-government-controlled areas (NGCA) in the East.

Before commenting on the figures, we would like to acquaint the reader with a comprehensive annual survey titled *“Ukrainian society: Monitoring social changes”*. The survey was initiated by the Institute of Sociology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 1992, less than a year after this country had gained independence. A questionnaire used in this study consists of 15 sections related to the key spheres of society. Each section (“Economic situation”, “Political situation”, “Social well-being and public moods”, “Local living conditions”, “Leisure and recreation”, etc.) contains a set of questions that make it possible to record and analyse the changes in the main social indicators.

The latest “Ukrainian society” survey was conducted from 19 September to 9 October 2020. 1,800 people (aged 18 and over) participated, and there was a special section focusing on the current environmental situation. According to the data, 36.6% of respondents felt worried about air pollution due to vehicle emissions, 33.4% were dissatisfied with the sanitary condition of their locality owing to excessive garbage, 26.7% and 20.0% respectively expressed concern over water and soil pollution due to chemicals and industrial waste, 24.3% expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of everyday foods (owing to the high amount of harmful ingredients), and 10.3% mentioned radioactive contamination (because of the 1986 accident at the Chornobyl nuclear power plant) as a factor affecting their health. On the one hand, these figures are not as discouraging as those at the beginning of the 2000s — when nearly half of Ukraine's population showed concern over air and water pollution (47.3% and 46.1% respectively); on the other hand, there has been an increase in the number of people

feeling dissatisfied with the quality of the natural environment in many respects. Besides, over half of those surveyed said that they lacked environmental safety and security [3: 266–269].

Well, what do Ukrainians understand by environmental security? As the data of another nationally representative survey show, most of our citizens regard environmental security as a state of the environment which does not affect their lives, health or well-being. (This survey was undertaken by the *Ilko Kucheriv “Democratic Initiatives” Foundation* together with the *Razumkov Centre Sociological Service* in July 2015; 2,100 persons were interviewed.) Answering the question about basic environmental rights, the majority (71.6%) of respondents mentioned the right to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Still, far fewer (21.4% and 15.5% respectively) knew about the right to start or join an environmental organisation or the right to free access to information related to environmental issues. So, according to these figures, a considerable part of Ukraine’s population are not fully conversant with environmental legislation. Another “weakness” of our citizens is low civic engagement: just a little over one per cent of those surveyed were members of an environmental association or movement and 8.3% had taken part (at least once) in an environmental campaign. More than nine tenths (93.1%) had never tried to stand up for their environmental rights even though they had felt that their rights had been violated [5].

The next survey sheds light on whom ordinary Ukrainians tend to blame for the current environmental problems facing their country. This study was conducted jointly by “*GfK Ukraine*” and “*Socis*”, two polling companies, in February–March 2017, and some of the findings are as follows: about one eighth (11.6%) of respondents thought that industrial corporations should bear responsibility for the damage that their products or activities have done to the natural world. Over half (50.2%) believed that the government was not doing enough to protect the environment, whereas the rest (35.3%) held the view that citizens themselves ought to take care of nature.

As for everyday actions aimed at helping the environment, 62.1% of those

surveyed reported cleaning up the area around their house or apartment block, 53.3% and 43.1% were trying to reduce energy and water consumption at home. Yet, it is unclear whether they saved water or energy in order to minimise their impact on the environment or simply to lower their water or electricity bills.

Only a small portion (7.3%) said that they had participated in (or supported) environmental campaigns. Using the mass media (newspapers, magazines, radio, etc.) to inform the public about environmental pollution in a particular locality or applying to a relevant authority in order to solve that problem turned out to be the least popular activities among our citizens: 6.6% and 7.8% respectively had some experience in handling environmental issues in such a way [6].

Certainly, we should not forget about environmentally conscious Ukrainians who launch or join important eco-initiatives such as zero waste living or river clean-ups, or those who take part in environmental protests or climate strikes. These people set an inspiring example for others, but they are not in the majority so far.

At this point, we have analysed some survey findings related to the “environmental profile” of Ukraine’s adult population. However, it would be interesting to know how our young fellow citizens (that is secondary and high school students) feel about the environment — first of all, because they are going to shape the future of this country. To this end, we designed a questionnaire and called it “*My attitude towards nature*”. The questionnaire consists of 30 statements, and each statement includes three alternatives to choose [4]. Each alternative, in turn, characterises a person’s type of world view with regard to the “human–nature” relationship (anthropo-, bio- or ecocentrism).

An anthropocentric perspective argues that human beings are the central or most significant entities in the world; thus, the natural world is supposed to serve their needs. A biocentric (or nature-centred) approach, in contrast, attaches the greatest value to nature and calls on humans to subordinate themselves to the natural world. Ecocentrism lies somewhere between these two extremes; it brings to the fore humans’ living and developing in harmony with nature [2: 18].

The questionnaire is organised in such a manner that its statements cover

practically all spheres where humans interact with nature, such as farming, fishing, gardening, crafts, manufacturing, construction, hobbies, outdoor activities, etc. A student's responses are put in a table with three columns, "A", "B" and "E" for statements corresponding to an anthropo-, bio- or ecocentric type of world view. Each option scores one point regardless of which type of world view it reflects. In each column, the responses are added together, then divided by 30 (the number of statements) and multiplied by 100%. The value obtained is a share of a particular type of world view (anthropo-, bio- or ecocentric). If we compare these three values, we can see which type of world view (anthropo-, bio- or ecocentric) prevails in this student. Then we repeat the calculation for other students and eventually see the prevailing type of world view for the whole class.

The questionnaire was pretested on a sample of 40 high school students (9th, 10th and 11th graders), from Kyiv and Poltava regions. The students could complete the questionnaire on paper, and it was also available in electronic form (published on "Vseosvita", a well-known Ukrainian teacher website). The preliminary results indicate a slight prevalence of an ecocentric world view, especially among students from Poltava region. This is obviously because the school that joined the study is presently being engaged in several environmental projects (such as developing of open-air educational and recreational areas, park and lake clean-ups, building a shelter for stray animals, etc.). So, we can conclude that hands-on experience is conducive to fostering environmental values.

Appendix. An example of a statement with three alternatives.

1. We should reduce the consumption of plastic products as far as possible. Not being biodegradable, they are usually collected in landfills or floating in the ocean, thereby inflicting damage on the environment and eventually on us humans. (This statement represents an ecocentric view.)

2. We have done nothing but destroy our Mother Nature; so we must stop using everything that is harmful to it, including plastics. (This statement corresponds to a biocentric worldview.)

3. If you ask me, it doesn't make any sense to give up plastics. First, these products are convenient; second, if we refuse them, a lot of people will lose their jobs. What exactly we should do is to learn how to recycle plastic. (This statement reflects an anthropocentric type of worldview.)

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