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# THE CITIZEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

## SUMMARY FINAL REPORT

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## RESEARCH TEAM

**Coordinator:**

**Dr Peter Brimblecombe**

University of East Anglia  
School of Environmental Sciences  
Norwich NR4 7TJ  
United Kingdom  
Tel.: +44- 1603 593003  
Fax: +44-1603 507719  
E-Mail: p.brimblecombe@uea.ac.uk

**Partners :**

**Professor Ulrik Lohm**

Department of Water and Environmental Studies  
Linköping University  
S-58183 Linköping  
Sweden  
Tel.: +46- 013 282278  
Fax: +46013 133630  
E-mail:geogo@tema.liu.se

**Professor Pierre Valarié**

Centre Comparatif d'Etudes et de Recherche sur les Politiques  
Rue de l'Université  
Montpellier 43000  
France  
Tel.: +33- 67 615460  
Fax: +33- 67 615482

## I. OBJECTIVES

The objective of this project was to study the relationship between the citizen and the environment; i.e. to augment the understanding of how citizens perceive nature and environmental problems, and how their environmental conceptual framework influences the interaction between citizen and formal and informal societal institutions. Although the citizen has remained the key referent throughout this project, the problematic notion of environmental citizenship demanded a dual orientation; firstly to conceptualise citizens' environmental *perceptions*, and secondly to analyse the factors which govern citizens' *participation* in environmental action. However, the aim of this project was not to adhere to any single theoretical conception of citizenship, but to assemble a programme of specific studies which would explore and analyse the *ensemble* of different forms through which environmental citizenship may be expressed and represented. Indeed, certain forms of environmental concern may explicitly challenge the right of nation states to define citizenship according to established forms of political representation and in this respect the aims of the project were pushed beyond a purely political-administrative analysis of the citizen and environment to consider a range of cultural, historical, economic and territorial issues which are also implicated in this relationship.

This project sought to identify and characterise some of the key sources of information about the environment which might contribute to citizens' personal images of the environment and the meanings and significance attributed to them. Although textual sources, such as newspapers, fictional literature, management documents and tourist guides, were considered important because of the detailed perspectives which they provide, this project also considered how the public face of local government and the activities of local environmental groups project distinctive representations of the environment. The way in which citizens either seek-out or select information from these sources to inform, consolidate or alter their understanding of specific environmental issues was also of interest. The existence of informal relationships - with friends, family, work colleagues, etc. - remained an important consideration throughout this work, and one of the tasks of this project was to assess how the interpersonal construction of environmental meanings contributes to citizens' overall perspective on the environment.

One further objective of this project was to explore how the institutional culture of local government, the local press, local environmental groups and other administrative bodies relate to citizen perspectives on the nature of the environment to form a joint discourse and working agenda on the environment. The extension of life-cycle approaches to the management of non-point sources of environmental pollution (e.g. household waste, energy consumption, private transport) requires a new accord between government and citizen, but this process may provoke value conflicts over individuals' lifestyle and their orientation to environmental problems in the political sphere. The aim of this part of the work was therefore to study the opportunities for citizens to engage in environmental decision-making through conventional political channels, but also to identify any factors which might constrain citizen participation and to consider what happens when these formal relationships cannot address the concerns of citizens.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The general strategy of this project was to initiate a series of individual studies which would collectively encompass the objectives set out above, but also provide detailed examples of how specific aspects of citizens' relationship with the environment are mediated by societal institutions.

Firstly, the general orientation of citizens to various sources of environmental information was identified by questionnaire surveys on environmental beliefs and attitudes. These surveys were also linked to content analyses of local newspapers to compare the agenda-setting role of the press compared with local government officials, environmental groups and interpersonal contacts, amongst others. In addition, the qualitative analysis of newspapers, fictional literature, tourist guides and environmental management documents provided a historical perspective on the cultural representation of specific valued environments, the role of interpersonal communication in sustaining this imagery and the types of behaviour deemed appropriate in special environmental areas.

Secondly, this work provided the background for more detailed analyses of the way in which local newspapers present environmental issues; both in terms of the popular conceptions of environment and society on which they operate, and the formal opposition of arguments, motives and meanings through which the medium structures the coverage of environmental disputes. This work was complemented by an array of studies on local environmental

groups which addressed their organisational structures, their campaign agendas, their relationships with local government and their role in the provision of environmental information.

The studies outlined above can be taken to illustrate a variety of different discourses on the environment and indicate how each source of environmental information either conditions or selectively re-presents the interests and meanings of environment expressed by the others. The third element of this project therefore addressed the way in which institutions of government in UK, France and Sweden have attempted to incorporate the environmental concerns of citizens by various means. These studies have used a range of techniques, including participant observation, structured informal interviews, institutional analyses and case study approaches, to identify the opportunities and constraints which affect citizens' ability to participate in the processes of local government and shape policy in accordance with their fundamental environmental beliefs. In particular, these studies focused upon the recognition of professional expertise on the environment, the role of local government in the provision of statutory environmental services and the involvement of citizens and local environmental groups in new forms of consultative, communicative and representative relationships with local authorities. In addition, these studies address the way in which citizens relate to the formalised relationships and procedures of local government and the alternative forms of environmental activity which they may adopt in response.

The objectives set out above address a complex set of overlapping relations which each national team addressed in their individual studies. A selection of these studies are presented in the form of individual scientific papers and give detailed accounts of the methodologies employed.

### III. MAIN RESULTS

#### Citizens' trust in information sources

- Politicians and local authorities are the least trusted sources of environmental information.
- Environmental groups are the highly trusted sources of environmental information.
- Mass media are highly trusted and the most frequently used sources of environmental information but do not affect the type of environmental issues which citizens are concerned about.

Questionnaire surveys indicate that news media, and newspapers in particular, are the most widely cited and trusted sources of information on the environment. In comparison environmental groups are highly trusted but rarely cited, and local authorities and politicians are generally poorly trusted. Paradoxically, content analyses of local newspapers showed that local government representatives were the most frequently used sources of information on environmental issues. Despite widespread trust and reference to mass media information, the content of newspapers was not found to influence citizens' environmental concerns and suggests that these may operate at two "territorial" levels: in terms of symbolic representations of the environment produced by the news media, and in relation to direct personal experiences of the local environment.

#### Citizens' environmental values

- The values associated with environmental concern in Sweden, Latvia, Estonia do not correspond to those identified in western European and north American research.
- Citizens' concerns for the environment are not founded on abstract conceptions of man and nature, science and technology, or the fulfilment of higher human needs.
- Surveys indicate uniform concern for local environmental problems which directly affect citizens' daily lives and a widespread faith in the principles of science and technology, if used carefully.

Questionnaire surveys in Sweden and the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia indicate that models of environmental value-change developed in the West cannot explain the bases of environmental concern in these countries. Statistical analyses show that there is a poor correlation between citizens' environmental concerns and values attributed to the "New Environmental Paradigm", the concept of "postmaterialism" and a presumed distrust of science and technology. Swedish citizens have a greater concern for largely symbolic global environmental issues, citizens in the Baltic states are anxious about their own degraded environment. Despite

this concern for the environment most people expressed a lasting faith in the principles of science and technology where it is used appropriately.

Environmental groups set the agenda

- Local environmental groups are used as information clearing houses.
- Local environmental groups are an important public space in which citizens attempt to raise environmental questions and problems.
- Local environmental groups set their own agenda on environmental issues with no public recourse and are not set up to respond to citizens' democratic needs.

The analysis of public inquiries to local environmental groups indicated that they largely function as clearing houses for environmental information. The nature of the calls also suggests a public need for democratic space in which to air their grievances and raise questions - a role which is not fulfilled by these groups. Environmental groups seek to operate as campaigning and action organisations and cannot sufficiently meet these demands without reducing their activist role. Local environmental groups set their own agenda with minimal public recourse; campaign issues are chosen by the group's core members. Furthermore, patterns of public interest in certain issues directly corresponds to the groups' campaign initiatives, and suggests that in so far as citizens use these groups as primary sources of environmental information they effectively shape public concern for the environment.

Inertia of environmental images

- Popular images of special environmental areas are very resistant to change.

The cultural significance of symbolic environments was explored through the historical analysis of management documents and fictional literature about the Norfolk Broads (UK). Fictional literature appears to have reflected rather than created the popularity of the Broads, but literary associations have occasionally been used to promote the area and frame recreational experience. During the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century this medium portrayed a consistent popular image of the Broads environment which centred upon ideas such as tranquillity, isolation, escapism, mystery, invigoration, and wildlife, but also included an evaluative element which indicated the type of behaviour which was judged suitable for recreationalists who might visit the region. A study of attitudes associated with the area around Lake Tåkern in Sweden suggested that similar connotations may be attached to other symbolic environments and can remain very stable over time.

Dominance of interpersonal communication

- Informal interpersonal contacts are an important source of environmental information.
- National "myths" about special environmental areas are sustained by inter-personal communications which may circumvent management efforts to amend people's behaviour.

Questionnaire surveys indicate that informal interpersonal contacts (i.e. with friends, neighbours and relatives, etc.) are substantial sources of environmental information. Recently the Broads Authority has attempted to reduce conflict over the uses of the Norfolk Broads and control the decline in the quality of the environment by manipulating the popular image back to the type portrayed in early fictional literature. However, this approach has met with only limited success; evidence suggests that the popular image of the Broads may be sustained largely by inter-personal channels and that visitors tend to focus on recreational activities rather than their surroundings. The promotion of uses associated with early images of the Broads may simply encourage a wider number of visitors to the area and thus increase exploitative pressures.

News media modulate the environmental agenda

- The creative licence used to portray environmental disputes in the local press may confound "official" representations of the issues.

- News coverage tends to focus on environmental disputes as examples of deeper crises in contemporary society.
- The formal rivalry of opinions presented in the news does not accord any privilege to the values expressed by rival news sources and bears no obligation to the personal meaning and context of citizens' protest.

Detailed analysis of local newspaper coverage suggested that the symbolic aspects of local environmental disputes can evoke cultural resonances which transcend the formal rivalry of opinions presented in the news. Since the bulk of newspaper coverage only addresses the environment in terms of extant environmental conflicts, the formal structure of the news tends to attribute value to aspects of the environment according to specific threats of environmental change and thereby emphasises the archetypal features of the story. However, the professional codes of the newspaper medium do not accord any necessary privilege to the opinions expressed by rival news sources and bears no obligation to the personal meaning and context of citizens' environmental protests. Although environmental activists may look to the local press and see their concerns reflected in it, the meanings they find are largely self-referential and otherwise overwhelmed by the reported spectacle of conflict. The observation that citizens have a high degree of trust in the press as a source of environmental information should therefore be qualified by acknowledging that the type of information which the medium produces is fragmented, inter-subjective and quite stylised.

#### Citizenship and militancy

- The professionalisation of environmental activists has blunted the role of environmental groups as a vehicle for radical democratic protest.
- The assimilation of older environmental groups into the wheels of government has led to the proliferation of single issue protest groups.

The local history of groups and associations for the defence of the environment has been characterised by two simultaneous developments; 1) local government has increasingly taken environmental problems into account, and 2) the leaders of environmental groups have become successively more integrated into the processes of defining, implementing and promoting these policies. One of the strengths of early environmental groups was their critical attitude towards overly technocratic policy-making, but the professionalisation of key activists has blunted the role of large environmental groups as channels of protest. This perceived decline in radicalism has led to the proliferation of single-issue protest groups which hold no obligation to more established environmental groups.

#### Environmental fora

- Different environmental discourses exist between environmental activists and local government which limit the scope of environmental fora.
- Environmental fora cannot meet the expectations of all environmental activists and inevitably force some to seek alternative avenues of influence.
- Environmental Fora have the potential to become an effective public space that can be redefined as conflicts shift.

The differing priorities which local government and environmental groups assign to specific environmental problems, their differing views of nature and use of language, preferred methods and time-frames for responding to these problems, make environmental fora untenable at certain ideological levels. These discrepancies may result in a reduction in the range of issues covered in the forum, particularly those of a more global nature and those which cannot readily be contained within the "neutral" logic of local government procedures. This situation is perceived by some environmental activists as a fundamental failure of local environmental fora and has prompted many to abandon them in favour of alternative means of influencing policy. However, the departure of these activists may be assuaged by an increase in other activists who are content to focus on single issues, such as transportation, and this may be seen as a natural and effective outcome of the efficiency criteria of local government. The changing focus of environmental fora indicates the potential for them to become a

dynamic public space which can be redefined as conflicts shift. The existence of environmental fora can have a measurable effect on local authorities' environmental policy-making, but interviews with activists who have attended them indicate that no matter what gains are made in favour of their respective discourses, it is never enough. The desire to fundamentally change government policy is a common trait amongst environmental activists and one which is necessary if they are to continue to effectively challenge dominant codes of behaviour.

#### Changing policy strategy

- The systematic extension of life-cycle approaches to the management of environmental problems in Sweden indicates the limits of political intervention.
- The adjustment of citizens' lifestyles to ameliorate non-point sources of pollution is hindered by value conflicts over the principles of environmental management.
- Cities may compete for capital investment on the basis of their environmental services and this has created a need to mobilise citizens as responsible consumers of these services.
- Local environmental groups are being pushed into the role of "delegate public services".

Swedish environmental policy may be considered successful and indeed exemplary in so far as it has handled specific environmental problems in a systematic way through the co-ordinated extension of legislative and administrative procedures. The gradual refinement of this system has, however, indicated the potential limits of its application; government efforts to influence citizens' lifestyle choices do not necessarily correspond to the values of all citizens and may be rejected if they conflict with their own conception of how the environment should be managed. French local government's engagement with environmental issues is largely expressed in terms of the provision of environmental services, but the market orientation of city executives creates competition between administrative territories for environmental skills as a criterion for capital investment. The new role of French local authorities as a strategic intermediary between large companies and citizens has fostered the use of local environmental groups as an instrumental channel of environmental information through which they seek to "produce" the citizen as an environmentally conscious consumer of the city's environmental services. Indeed, the formal recognition, or titularisation, of environmental skills by local government and their consequent emphasis on technical discourses on the management of environmental issues has placed environmental groups in the role of "delegate public services" which act as a political interface with citizens.

#### The difficulties of public services

- The environment may constitute a new strategic field of rivalry between territorial administrations and urban and rural communities.
- Large cities are better able to define their environmental image through the use of communicative strategies aimed at "responsible" townspeople.

In France, the process of administrative decentralisation has fostered the development of the environment as an object of local concern and as a new strategic field of rivalry between different territorial administrations. However, the "moralisation" of public life according to these new environmental interests is different from the earlier situation with regard to public health and hygiene, in so far as it requires the mobilisation of local inhabitants who may not necessarily be convinced of the benefits of new environmental policies. In these circumstances larger cities are better able to develop their environmental image through the use of communicative strategies aimed at "responsible" townspeople. However, people who live in peripheral cities and beyond may perceive this new environmental morality as a provocative luxury at their expense.

#### The market and sustainable development

- The high levels of technical competence required to implement environmental policies has resulted in the widespread contractualisation of environmental services by local government and undermined their capacity to manage local environmental affairs.

The implementation of new environmental policies and regulatory standards within local government requires relatively high levels of technical competence which may not be generally available. Thus, local government has become increasingly dependent upon the environmental services offered by specialised private companies, to the extent that they have effectively become clients of these firms without significant opportunities to negotiate their terms. Political administrations therefore find it difficult to maintain appropriate levels of communication regarding the public use of these environmental services and thereby undermine their efficiency.

#### IV. SCIENTIFIC INTEREST AND POLICY RELEVANCE

The following reflections and recommendation can be made on the basis of the project's results.

EU enlargement and new environmental orientations

- The accession of new member states into the European Union may provide an opportunity to re-align environmental policy with regard to the citizen. (N.B. This research was completed, just as Sweden, Austria and Finland joined the EU in January 1995.)

Analyses of Swedish environmental policy and citizens' environmental attitudes in the Baltic states of Latvia and Estonia have raised some important policy considerations with regard to the expansion of the European Union. The Swedish case has highlighted the question of how to adjust systems of environmental management to accommodate citizens' lifestyle orientations in a way which is sensitive to their fundamental environmental and political values. In contrast, citizens' concerns about immediate environmental conditions in the Baltic states indicate the need to address tangible environmental problems in an effective way. These examples may represent extreme ends of a spectrum of environmental concerns but the overall findings of this project suggest that these issues may have general applicability throughout the European Union.

Coordinated environmental communication.

- There is a need for better coordination between citizens' requirements for environmental information and local authorities' attempts to orchestrate citizens' environmental behaviour.
- Local environmental issues may be resolved more satisfactorily if citizens have free access to a wider range of government information on the local environment.

Most citizens have a general awareness of environmental issues which they can often relate to their own experience of local environmental problems and they acquire their environmental information from a selection of public sources. At the same time local authorities are subject to a variety of pressures which require them to orchestrate citizens' behaviour with regard to the environment more efficiently. The type of environmental information which local authorities use to address these demands does not necessarily correspond to the interests or personal ambitions of all citizens, however. Local authorities may enable citizens to address their environmental concerns more effectively and help allay citizens' general feelings of distrust towards them by providing a much more open and less autocratic supply of information about the local environment.

Mass media and policy making.

- The treatment of environmental issues in the mass media should not be taken to represent the full scope and depth of citizens' environmental concerns.
- Although news media may alert citizens to extant environmental issues, they cannot be expected to represent local authorities' policy initiatives with high-fidelity.

Although newspapers and news media in general may provide a useful though qualified source of environmental information for citizens, the routine coverage of environmental disputes presented in the press should not be taken to encapsulate the full scope and depth of citizens' environmental concerns, nor can it explain their personal motivations in any meaningful way. The press tend to interpret environmental concerns in terms of what has gone before and present actions as an archetypal recapitulation of previous historic movements; they work upon extant models of the way society operates and are not attuned to the interactive processes of meaning construction on which contemporary forms of environmental action are based. Environmental policy should not therefore be based upon the perceived nature of environmental concerns which are expressed in the media, and

neither should politicians expect that the policies which they seek to promote through the media be represented or received with high fidelity.

Sensitivity to interpersonal communication and management authorities.

- Local governments should acknowledge that interpersonal channels of communication are beyond their control and may frustrate conspicuous efforts to amend people's behaviour.
- Environmental management authorities would benefit by presenting their policy initiatives in line with the popular conception of the areas they manage.

Several of the studies conducted in this project have shown the importance of interpersonal communication as a channel for environmental information. However, these communication networks are double-edged and may pose severe problems for institutions which seek to promote ideas or behaviour which diverge from the popular view - for example, engendering a sense of value in sensitive recreational environments. Thus management authorities should recognise that the public's acceptance of, and cooperation with, environmental policies is dependent upon the perceived authenticity of managerial perspectives on the environment.

The role of professionals in implementing EU environmental legislation.

- Local managers would be capable of implementing European environmental legislation more efficiently if they were kept informed of forthcoming regulations.
- Environmental management training may reduce localised distortions in the supply and demand for environmental skills and services.

The implementation of European environmental legislation requires new operating standards within local government, but these may constitute significant constraints for those who manage local environmental affairs. Managers need to be better informed of forthcoming legislation, so that they can make appropriate provisions and negotiations at an earlier stage. However, research has suggested that the availability and professionalisation of environmental skills remains a problem at the local government level. The market which governs the distribution of environmental goods and services within local administrative territories is relatively immature and tends to favour short-term interests which are not compatible with the aims of sustainable development. The provision of specialised training on environmental management at the local level could broaden the market for these skills and thereby reduce any localised distortions in the supply and demand for environmental services.

Developing Democratic Spaces

- The development of a variety of neutral democratic spaces may facilitate greater citizen participation in local environmental issues.

Studies on the operation of local environmental groups, their interactions with the public and their representations to local government through environmental fora illustrate the inadequacy of these channels in terms of democratic environmental policy-making. The virtual exclusion of the public from both environmental groups' and local authorities' policy-making processes suggested the need for a more neutral and inclusive public space through which citizens may participate in local environmental affairs. Successful experiments with environmental mediation and citizen panels have already been undertaken in countries such as Canada, Germany and Switzerland and have enabled citizens to take the lead in environmental decision making, independently from environmental groups' and respective governments' agendas. As other Local Agenda 21 initiatives are put into place, it may become clearer as to which democratic spaces are most effective in combating environmental degradation and most appropriate in handling different environmental disputes.