

WDNR 2001 SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY SURVEY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PURPOSE:

To determine Wisconsin residents' perceptions and attitudes towards their forests including their understanding of and concern for environmental and forestry issues, views on forestry dependency and management, and their trust in given sources of environmental information. It is also the purpose of this study to determine if differences in various demographic classifications affect opinions and perceptions.

METHODOLOGY:

The valid responses from 504 telephone surveys were tabulated and analyzed cumulatively and were also cross-tabulated and analyzed according to various demographic classifications.

Key Findings of Complete Data:

- Wisconsin residents share a concern for environmental issues. 96.4% of respondents indicate that environmental issues are 'somewhat' or 'very' important to them, personally.
- Respondents express the greatest concern for water pollution, followed by recycling, wildlife habitat, and forestlands.
- Wisconsin residents recognize that forests are important to their daily lives. 93.8% of respondents feel that forests are 'somewhat' or 'very' important to their daily lives.
- Respondents believe that water pollution is the most urgent environmental issue. Just 12.3% of respondents feel that 'protecting forestlands from development' is the most important environmental issue.
- There is a strong perception that quality of forestland in Wisconsin is diminishing and that the quantity is decreasing.
- The primary role of a forest is seen as 'a contributor to the environment'.

- Respondents feel that the State owns the most forestland in Wisconsin.
- 60% of respondents feel forestland is best managed through human efforts. Just 7.2% of respondents feel that the government should decrease its level of involvement.
- Nearly 50% of respondents believe that the use of trees today jeopardizes their future use. Despite that, 99.8% of respondents believe that trees are a renewable resource. However, respondents believe that trees most commonly grow back through human replanting rather than growing back on their own.
- In regards to harvesting, responses are weighted toward a belief that few trees are appropriate for cutting.
- 92.3% of respondents 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the concept that Wisconsin's forests can be managed to meet the state's economic, recreational, and environmental needs at the same time.
- Respondents recognize the importance of forests to future generations, recreational activities, wildlife, and air and water quality. Far fewer respondents recognize the importance of forests to the local economy.
- The DNR is recognized as a highly credible source of environmental information, second only to universities, and comparable to public radio. Public agencies were more trusted than private organizations, such as paper and lumber companies.

Key Findings of Cross-Tabulations:

- Respondents from Milwaukee County express less concern for environmental issues, in general, and do not believe that forests are as important to their daily lives or the local economy as respondents from other counties do.
- Just 4.6% of Milwaukee County respondents rank 'protecting forestland from development' as their most urgent environmental concern, as compared to 13.5% of respondents from other counties.
- Milwaukee County respondents express greater concern that the use of forests today jeopardizes their future availability than do respondents from other counties.
- Milwaukee County residents express greater concern that the quality of Wisconsin's forestlands is worsening and that the quantity is decreasing than respondents from other counties.

- While 61.8% of respondents from other counties believe forests are best managed through human management, just 48.4% of Milwaukee County respondents agree. Milwaukee County respondents prefer that forests be left alone. Ironically, respondents from Milwaukee County feel that fewer trees are appropriate for cutting than do respondents from other counties. Also, Milwaukee County respondents are more supportive of government involvement in protecting forestlands. It may be inferred that Milwaukee County respondents are more supportive of government protection, but less supportive of active management such as sustainable forestry.
- 85.2% of Milwaukee County respondents believe forestlands can be managed to meet the state's economic, recreational, and environmental needs, as compared to 93.2% from other counties.
- Milwaukee County respondents are less involved in outdoor activities that might use forestland, own less forestland, and have a looser definition of a forest than do respondents from other counties.
- The 25-34, 64-74, and 75+ age groups share the most concern for environmental issues.
- The 18-24, 25-34, and 65-74 age groups all trust the DNR the most as a source of environmental information.
- The 55+ age group is the only age group that believes that the quality of forests is improving.
- Women generally express more concern than men do over environmental issues.
- Women are more concerned than men are that the use of trees today jeopardizes their future use, and are more likely to believe that the quality of Wisconsin's forestlands is diminishing and that the quantity is decreasing.
- Women are more supportive than men are of government involvement in managing forestland. However, women are also more likely to believe that forests are best left alone, rather than actively managed through human efforts, than men are. They are also less supportive of tree removal. It can be inferred that women are more likely to support a government policy that is protectionist.

Conclusions from Complete Data:

- Results of this survey indicate a shared concern among respondents for Wisconsin's forests, and a belief that forests primarily serve as contributors to the environment. Respondents express concern for forestlands particularly and the environment in general. As environmental concerns such as water pollution and wildlife habitat present more concern for respondents than the protection of forestlands does, an effective strategic communications plan will stress the importance of forests in terms of other environmental issues.
- While respondents are highly concerned about the environment and the environmental importance of trees, most do believe that some trees are appropriate for cutting and believe that the state's economic, recreational, and environmental issues can all be met by forest management. However, there are respondents who oppose nearly all cutting of forestland. This population must be educated about the benefits of sustainable forestry.
- Forests are far more recognized for their environmental importance than their importance to the economy, or as a means for jobs and income. In order to advance a communications strategy that stresses sustainable forestry, citizens must be made more aware of the multidimensional role of forests.
- An increased understanding of the multidimensional role of forests and the philosophies of sustainable forestry will also increase understanding of forest regeneration and the benefits of sustainable forestry.
- The survey indicates that many respondents are not well educated about forestry issues. Many respondents express a concern that the use of trees today jeopardizes their future availability. These respondents must be educated about the advantages of responsibly managed sustainable forestry. Additionally, some respondents' opinions are based upon perceptions rather than knowledge or experience. This is exemplified by opinions about the quality and quantity of Wisconsin's forests as compared to 50 years ago. Respondents who were not alive 50 years ago had negative opinions, likely based upon their own perceptions. The only age group that believes forestland is improving in quality and increasing in quantity is the 55+ age group, the only group that may have experienced Wisconsin's forests 50 years ago. It is important that the population is educated about forestry issues so that their opinions can be based upon fact.
- The public is open to increased government involvement in protecting forests and believes that forests are best managed through human efforts.

- Given this belief, and the trust that the public shares in the DNR as a source of information on environmental issues, the DNR is in an excellent position to, through a comprehensive strategy, educate the public about forests and sustainable forestry concepts.

Conclusions from Cross-Tabulations:

- Women are generally more concerned about environmental issues and the decreasing quantity and diminishing quality of forestland than men are. However, women are less supportive than men are of tree removal and are more likely than men to believe that forests are best left alone. The fact that women already have a heightened concern for environmental issues makes them a prime audience for a communications strategy. However, it may be challenging to convince women of the benefits of sustainable forestry because women are more likely than men are to oppose tree removal and government management of forestlands.
- Respondents from Milwaukee County are more disconnected physically and emotionally, from Wisconsin's forestlands than are respondents from other counties. Given their lower participation rates in outdoor activities that involve forestland, and their lower ownership rates of forestland, Milwaukee County respondents seem to come into contact with forestland less frequently than those respondents from other counties.

Similarly, respondents from Milwaukee County do not recognize the importance of the forest and the environment to their daily lives to the same extent that respondents from other counties do. Respondents from Milwaukee County do not believe that environmental issues are as important to them, personally, as respondents from other counties. They also do not believe that forests are as important to their daily lives, to the local economy, or to the travel image of Wisconsin as respondents from other counties do.

- While more Milwaukee County respondents believe that the quality and quantity of Wisconsin's forests are decreasing than respondents from other counties, fewer Milwaukee County respondents believe that protecting forestlands is the most important environmental issue.
- Comparative study reveals that Milwaukee respondents are slightly less educated on certain issues than respondents from other counties. A greater percentage of Milwaukee County respondents, as compared to respondents from other counties, believe that the use of trees today jeopardizes their future availability. This again offers an opportunity for education about the benefits of responsibly managed sustainable forestry.

Also, as seen with the entire sample, Milwaukee County respondents do not base their opinions about the quality and quantity of Wisconsin's forests on experience. 57.3% of Milwaukee County respondents were not born until after 1950 and are therefore unable to judge the quality and quantity of forests today as compared to 50 years ago through their own experiences. Instead, these respondents likely responded based upon their own perceptions which may be the results of published data or public opinion. This represents an opportunity for education, so that opinions are not based upon perceptions, but rather upon data.

- The DNR is in an excellent position to educate Milwaukee County residents and those from other counties as well, as they are the second most trusted source of environmental information for both subsets.
- While respondents from Milwaukee County are less physically involved with the forests and see forests as less important to them in a variety of ways than those respondents from other counties, Milwaukee County respondents are comparatively more protective of trees. Milwaukee County respondents are less supportive of tree removal than respondents from other counties. Again, this protectionist philosophy may be the result of a lack of education, as respondents from Milwaukee County are more likely to believe that the use of trees today jeopardize their future use. Education about the advantages of sustainable forestry could make Milwaukee County residents realize that managed cutting does not jeopardize the future availability of trees.
- While Milwaukee County respondents are more supportive of increased government involvement in forest protection, respondents from Milwaukee County are less supportive of human management to care for forests. It might be concluded from these seemingly contradictory findings that Milwaukee County respondents support a governmental policy that is more protectionist, but not one that directly involves the government in managing forest growth. This may present an obstacle for the DNR in attempting to manage sustainable forestry. It is evident that a successful effort to actively manage Wisconsin's forests must be coupled with a program to educate citizens about the advantages of sustainable forestry.