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*bulletin*

Environmental Indicators  
for Canada and the United States

*by Steve Hayward  
and Laura Jones*

*with Boris DeWiel, Nicole Goranko  
Rosemary Herbut-Fikus  
Dana C. Joel, Erin Schiller  
and M. Danielle Smith*



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The Fraser Institute  
2nd Floor, 626 Bute Street  
Vancouver, BC, V6E 3M1

call: (604) 688-0221, ext. 306 or fax: (604) 688-8539.

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## About the authors

**BORIS DEWIEL** is a Doctoral Candidate in Political Science at the University of Calgary and, from 1998 to 2000, he will be a Post-Doctoral Fellow in the Department of Political Science at the University of British Columbia. He has a Master's Degree in Environmental Science from the University of Calgary and held a joint internship at The Fraser Institute and The Pacific Research Institute in 1996. He has published articles in history, political theory and Canadian politics.

**NICOLE GORANKO** is a research assistant in the Environment department at The Fraser Institute. During 1996 and 1997, she worked at the Institute as a researcher for the National Media Archive's British Columbia Provincial Election Study. She contributed to the design and implementation of "Tracking the News," the National Media Archive's extensive program monitoring Canadian television news; she also contributed to the research for 8 editions of "On Balance" for *Fraser Forum*. She will receive a B.A. in Geography and History from Simon Fraser University in June 1998.

**STEVE HAYWARD** is a Senior Fellow of the Pacific Research Institute. He has written on politics, economics, public policy, law, and environmental issues for scholarly and popular journals including *National Review*, *Modern Age*, *First Things*, *Policy Review*, *The Intercollegiate Review*, and the *California Journal*. He is a contributing editor for *Reason* magazine, a contributing author for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of the American Right*, and his columns have appeared in many newspapers. He holds an MA in Government from Claremont Graduate School, and is currently completing his Ph.D. in American Studies at Claremont Graduate School. In 1990 and 1992, he was an Olive Garvey Fellow of the Mont Pelerin Society and recently held a two-year term as a Henry Salvatori Fellow of the Heritage Foundation in Washington, DC. This year, he is the Bradley Fellow at the Heritage Foundation.

**ROSEMARY HERBUT-FIKUS** is the President of Wild Rose Research & Consulting, which does research on environmental and ag-economic policy and regulation. She received a B.A. in Political Science and Public Policy from the University of Lethbridge in 1996, participated in The Fraser Institute's Student Leaders Colloquium in 1996, and held a joint internship with The Fraser Institute and The Pacific Research Institute in Sacramento, CA, in 1997. She has written several articles for the weekly newsmagazine, *British Columbia Report*, and spoken before the Southern Alberta Council of Public Affairs. She has advised Alberta's Minister of Energy on global warming and currently sits on the Standing Policy Committee for the Environment for the City of Lethbridge. Ms Herbut-Fikus is a member of several other organizations, including the University of Lethbridge Alumni Association and the Southern Alberta Home-Based Business Association.

**DANA C. JOEL** is Director of Research with the Pacific Research Institute (PRI), a public-policy organization in San Francisco that promotes free-market principles. Before joining the PRI, Ms Joel was Deputy Director of Regulatory Affairs for Citizens for a Sound Economy (CSE), where she focused on environmental and other regulatory policy issues, and Director of the New Jersey CSE and Director of Policy for State Projects, where she promoted numerous state policy reforms in education, health care, and tax policy. Prior to joining CSE, Ms Joel was Research Associate in Domestic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation. She has written numerous studies and articles for newspapers, magazines, and journals including *The Washington Post*, the *Washington Times*, *USA Today*, the *Baltimore Sun*, *Dallas Morning News*, and the Cato Institute's *Regulation Magazine*, and contributed to the book, *Privatizing Correctional Institutions* (Transaction Publishers, 1994). Ms Joel received her education at Butler University in Indianapolis and George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia.

LAURA JONES is the Senior Environment Economist at The Fraser Institute. She joined The Fraser Institute in 1996 to develop the Institute's policy on the environment and has recently organized a series of conferences on mining, forestry and fishing in British Columbia. During 1997, she edited *Fish or Cut Bait! The Case for Individual Transferable Quotas in the Salmon Fishery of British Columbia* and *Global Warming: The Science and the Politics*. Ms Jones has also published articles in *Fraser Forum*, *The Vancouver Sun* and the *Ottawa Citizen*, and was co-author of the first edition of the Fraser Institute Critical Bulletin *Environmental Indicators for Canada and the United States*. She received her B.A. in Economics from Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts, and her M.A. in Economics from Simon Fraser University in British Columbia. Prior to joining the Institute, she taught economics at various colleges throughout the Lower Mainland of British Columbia, and is currently teaching *Economic Issues* at the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

ERIN SCHILLER is a public policy fellow with The Pacific Research Institute (PRI) in San Francisco, where her research is focused upon market-based environmental reform and privatization. She has written editorials on numerous environmental topics for publications such as the *San Jose Mercury News*, *The Washington Times*, *The Orange County Register*, *The Oakland Tribune*, and *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. In February 1998, Ms Schiller release a report entitled *The Road Ahead: The Economic and Environmental Benefits of Congestion Pricing*. She graduated in 1997 from Claremont McKenna College, where her senior honors thesis was on free-market environmentalism in the state of Oregon.

M. DANIELLE SMITH is the Managing Director of the Canadian Property Rights Research Institute (CanPRRI), an independent Canadian educational institute that conducts research into the role of the individual's right to own property in creating a free and prosperous society. She joined CanPRRI in May 1997 and has published studies and articles on property rights, endangered species, and marketing boards. Her latest publications are *Endangered Species Protection: Lessons Canada Should Learn from the US Endangered Species Act* and the fact sheet *What Do the Constitution and Bill of Rights Say about Property Rights?* Her articles have appeared in the newspapers, *The Calgary Herald* and *The Edmonton Journal*. Prior to joining CanPRRI, Ms Smith was a researcher at The Fraser Institute, where she wrote articles for the *Canadian Student Review* and co-authored the first edition of *Environmental Indicators for Canada and the United States* (April 1997) and *Government-Sponsored Training Programs: Failure in the United States, Lessons for Canada* (December 1997). She holds a B.A. in English and a B.A. in Economics from the University of Calgary.

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## Introduction

Modern public attention to the environment dates roughly from the first Earth Day in 1970. But despite a generation of concern, public opinion about environmental issues remains confused and contradictory, and as a consequence public policy on the environment is highly contentious and unsettled.

It is difficult to judge public sentiment about the environment accurately because the environment, taken as a whole, is a broad and all encompassing idea. “The environment” is an evocative term, suggestive of mankind’s relationship to nature, and conveying connotations of eternity and our generation’s bequest to succeeding generations. The environment, perhaps uniquely among public issues, invites citizens to engage in metaphysical speculations. Environmental issues comprise both narrow technical concerns, often measured in parts per billion, and broad emotional concerns, such as the symbolic value of a virgin forest.

The broad and amorphous nature of environmental issues works both for and against environmentalism. When pollsters ask specifically whether the environment is a serious problem, majorities answer strongly in the affirmative, and people are generally pessimistic about environmental trends. According to the most recent Wirthlin survey on environmental issues, 79 percent think that “problems regarding pollution and the environment will get worse during my lifetime” (Wirthlin Group 1997). The Wirthlin survey similarly finds that 76 percent agree with the statement that “protecting the environment is so important that requirements and standards cannot be too high, and continuing environmental improvements must be made regardless of cost.”

On the other hand, if pollsters ask open-ended questions about what issues people regard as most important, the environment does very poorly, usually in the single digits. A 1995 Gallup Poll reported that only one percent of respondents ranked the environment as the “most important problem, while a 1994 Roper Survey that listed the environment among 20 public problems ranked the environment sixteenth, just above alcoholism. (The Gallup and Roper Surveys are included in Ladd and Bowman 1995. Crime, the economy, and education are usually picked as the most important public problems, with 40 to 60 percent being the

typical range for respondents naming these as particular problems on open-ended or multiple-choice surveys.) This is not to suggest that public concern about the environment is overstated or misunderstood. Contradiction within public opinion is not a new or remarkable phenomenon and the environment is similar to many other public issues where the public often tells pollsters that the government does not spend enough money on the specific problem while also saying that the government as a whole is too big and spends too much. (If policy makers made policy according to the polls on an issue-by-issue basis, total government spending would soar.)

The fact that people rank the environment low on an open-ended ranking of public problems means that, while many people may have strong opinions on the environment in the abstract, the environment does not hold their immediate interest in the same way crime and education do. While public-policy debates seldom command close public attention, citizens are more informed on high-profile issues such as crime and education than they are on environmental issues, and public preferences are more accurately and fully reflected in policy changes that are made on the high profile issues. (The movement for tougher prison sentencing for criminals, such as “three strikes,” is a good example of strong and clear public preferences being translated into policy.)

### How people form an opinion about the environment

Given the fact that the public does not pay close attention to the details of environmental issues, it is not surprising that public opinion is not in harmony with the general facts. Even as polls show that people think the environment is getting worse, by most measures environmental quality has dramatically improved over the last generation and is continuing to improve.

There are three ways in which the public comes to form its opinions about the environment. First, because people are less likely to spend time following environmental

issues in detail and because the environment ranks low on the list of public concerns, environmental issues and policy tend to be driven by the most highly motivated interest groups, typically environmental organizations. And, since democratic government is most responsive to an atmosphere of crisis, it is in the interest of environmental organizations to promote a sense of crisis much of the time. A feature series on environmental issues in the *New York Times* observed that environmental organizations might be “in danger of becoming the green equivalent of the military lobby, more interested in sowing fear and protecting wasteful programs than in devising a new course” (Schneider 1993: A1). Other critics have described some environmentalists as “crisis entrepreneurs.”

Second, the news media, which like bad news—especially when it can be sensationalized—aggravates this problem by promoting images of environmental threats. News about positive environmental progress is down-played. In his magisterial book, *A Moment on the Earth*, environmental writer Gregg Easterbrook recounts how, in 1992, he was struck by finding the good-news story, “Air Found Cleaner in U.S. Cities,” in “a small box buried on page A24” of the *New York Times*. The story went unmentioned in most other media outlets. “Surely,” Easterbrook observed, “any news that air quality was in decline would have received front-page attention. The treatment suggested that the world was somehow disappointed by an inappropriately encouraging discovery” (Easterbrook 1995: xiii). This asymmetry in the way the media handle environmental issues further distorts public perception.

Third, public perception of environmental quality is powerfully driven by what economists call “the wealth effect.” Several studies have shown a positive correlation between rising incomes and demand for environmental quality. As people become more affluent, their tolerance for risk of all kinds diminishes. This helps explain some of the reason why citizens of wealthy nations believe their environment is getting worse even as the data show it is getting better.

### **The effect of public opinion on policy**

Incorrect public perceptions about environmental trends can have important consequences for policy since, not only do they cause anxieties that may be unwarranted by facts or out of proportion to the true risks involved, but they can also lead to skewed policy priorities. In 1990, the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s Science Advisory Board

warned that current laws and regulations “are more reflective of public perceptions of risk than of scientific understanding of risk” (USEPA Science Advisory Board 1990). And, a 1993 report from the Center for Resource Economics found that EPA resources were allocated in amounts inversely proportional to genuine risk. “EPA’s budget and staff resources are not allocated on the basis of risk,” the report concluded. “Consequently, more than 80 percent of EPA’s resources are spent on pollutants considered to be relatively low risk by federal scientists” (Smolensky, Dickson and Caplan 1993: 1).

To be sure, public perceptions are often wrong on many other areas of public policy. Plant closing and layoff announcements often generate waves of anxiety among the public and the media and lower consumer confidence even when unemployment is falling and the economy is strong. In the fullness of time, however, public perception usually corrects itself as a clear sense of economic progress takes hold. One reason for this long-term confidence in the economy is that economic journalism and economic policy are fully informed today by a number of well-understood measures (i.e., money supply, the employment cost index, inflation, interest rates, housing starts, and, of course, the composite Index of Leading Economic Indicators).

### **Lack of reliable measures of environmental quality**

For the environment, however, we lack a series of good, clear measures of environmental quality and progress. In part, this is because our thinking about the environment is still in some ways in its infancy, which is reflected in the fact that the focus of environmental concern has so often shifted. Twenty-five years ago most environmental concern centered on problems of *pollution* and *scarcity*—the view that we were fouling our own nest and would quickly run out of natural resources. Today it is clear that anxieties about scarcity were unfounded, and concern has shifted to problems of global warming and “biodiversity,” for which we lack uncontested scientific theory and objective data. In equal part, the lack of good measures of environmental quality stem from the methodological difficulty of constructing such measures. As long ago as 1972, the President’s Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) wrote that “the process of developing dependable indices will be a long one,” but the CEQ never got very far with the task. CEQ published a report on environmental trends only intermittently; the last *Environmental Trends* report was published in 1989.



## State of the environment: things are improving

To fill this gap in public knowledge and perception about environmental progress, to separate the facts from alarmist misinformation, and to bring balance to the environmental debate, The Fraser Institute and the Pacific Research Institute for Public Policy have developed *Environmental Indicators for Canada and the United States*. The indicators are designed to help the public assess more accurately the state of the environment in several key areas: air quality, water quality, natural resources, land use and condition, solid wastes, energy, pesticides, toxic releases, and wildlife.

This report finds that, contrary to public opinion, in most instances objectives for protecting human health and the environment are being met, pollution and wastes are being controlled, and resources and land are being sustainably and effectively managed. Environmental quality in both Canada and the United States is *improving*, not deteriorating. Following are some salient points.

- Overall, environmental quality improved 10.8 percent in Canada and 18.6 percent in the United States relative to conditions in 1980.
- Air pollution from sulphur dioxide, nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide, particulates, and lead has decreased considerably in both the Canada and the United States.
- The ambient level of sulphur dioxide decreased by 61.5 percent in Canada and 60.7 percent in the United States between 1975 and 1995.
- Ambient lead concentration fell 99.9 percent both in Canada and in the United States between 1976 and 1994.
- In 1994, over 90 percent of the lakes tested in the United States supported overall use.
- In 1995, Alberta and Saskatchewan met their water quality goals over 90 percent of the time; British Columbia and New Brunswick met their goals over 80 percent of the time; Manitoba met its goals over 70 percent of the time.
- DDE concentrations have fallen over 75 percent in Lake Michigan and Lake Superior, over 80 percent in Lake Erie and Lake Ontario, and 90 percent in Lake Huron since 1977.
- Forests are increasing as growth exceeds the harvesting of trees both in Canada and in the United States.
- The amount of land set aside for parks, wilderness, and wildlife is increasing in both Canada and the United States.
- The amounts of toxic chemicals exposed to the environment is decreasing.
- Critical wetland habitat is not declining.

## Objectives of the study

This document is designed to give the reader an overview of national environmental quality in Canada and the United States. While the indicators include many local or regional environmental issues, such as the air quality of selected cities, the goal of this study is to provide a “big picture” of general, nationwide environmental trends in both countries. It does not attempt to develop indicators for global controversies such as tropical rainforest deforestation, climate change, and bio-diversity.

Most of the data in this report come from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Environmental Data Compendium 1995. Where OECD survey results were unavailable, data were supplemented by information from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Environment Canada, or other official government sources.

The indicators are divided into primary and secondary categories. Within each category, there are several subsections. Primary environmental indicators include information about air quality, water quality, natural resources, land use and condition, and solid wastes. These indicators provide direct information about environmental quality. The secondary indicators include often cited environmental measures such as carbon-dioxide emissions, oil spills, numbers of wildlife species, use of pesticides, and toxic releases. These indicators are considered “secondary” since they provide only indirect information about environmental quality. In the final section of the report, the trend in environmental performance for the primary environmental indicators is compiled into an index. The index shows considerable improvement in the environmental performance of both Canada and the United States.