

What do Australians think about protecting the environment?

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Introduction

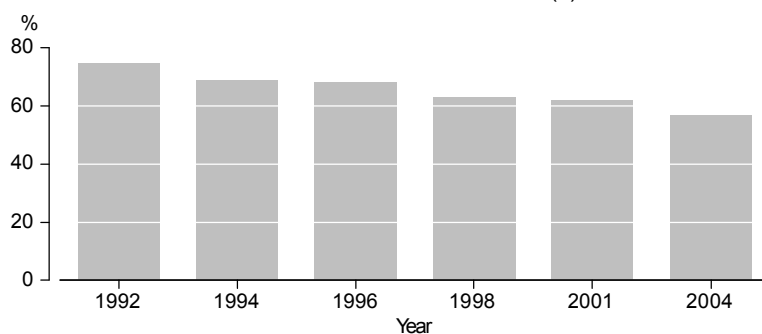
Australians are considerably less concerned about the environment than they have been in the past despite the fact that more people are undertaking environmental or "green" activities. This report looks at trends that have occurred over the last decade, concentrating on the level of environmental concern and people's involvement in environmental activities. Data collected in ABS' Environmental Issues Surveys conducted since 1992 and associated data relating to environmental activities undertaken are presented below to explore these trends.

Level of environmental concern

Concern for the environment has been in steady decline and has reached its lowest point since 1992 when ABS' Environmental Issues Surveys began (Graph 1). In 1992, three quarters of all Australian adults, or 8.6 million people aged 18 years or older, stated they were concerned about environmental problems. By 2004, the proportion of people concerned had declined to 57%.

GRAPH 1

ADULTS CONCERNED ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS (a)



(a) As a proportion of all ages people aged 18 years and over.

Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)*

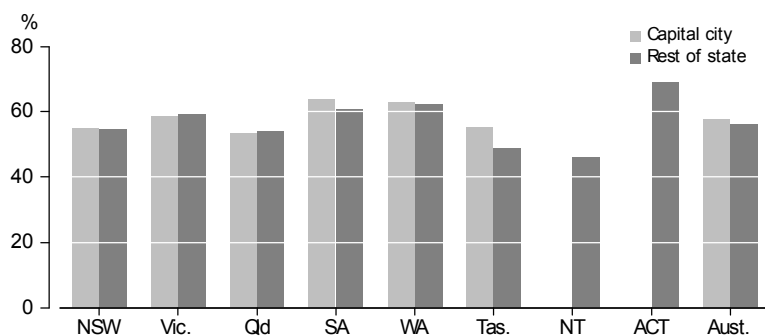
What influences concern about environmental issues

All states and territories have shown a decline in concern about the environment, with the most notable decline occurring in Northern Territory (declining from 80% of adults in 1992 to 46% in 2004). People living in the ACT have consistently demonstrated the highest level of concern for the environment but a decline is still evident (from 84% in 1992 to 69% in 2004).

Graph 2 shows that people living in capital cities display similar trends to those living outside the capital cities but in the same state. While there is some variability in the results, it is expected that these trends are largely related to localised or regional environmental factors which typically would only cause minor anomalies in the longer term trends. Examples of such factors include: the bushfires in NSW; water problems associated with the Murray River; or the proposed siting of wind farms in Victoria. Such issues do not appear to impact on the long term trends.

GRAPH 2

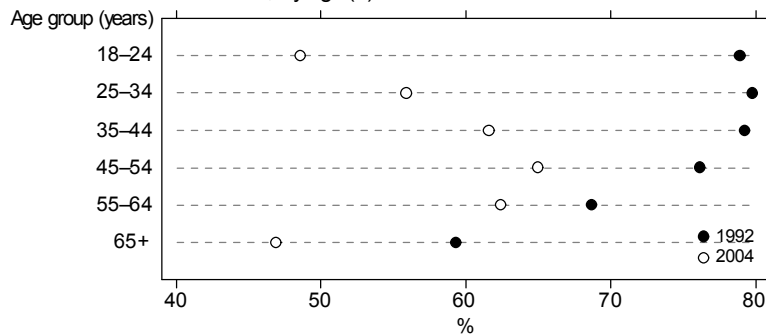
ADULTS CONCERNED ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL PROBLEMS,
By capital city/rest of state—2004



Note: NT and ACT data refers to the whole territory.

Throughout the survey period to date, people aged 65 years and older have displayed the least concern about the environment, with only 47% of this age group reporting environmental concerns in 2004. Although concern about the environment has continued to decrease across all age groups between 1992 and 2004 (Graph 3), the most pronounced decline has occurred in the younger Australians, especially those aged 18-24 years, with concern in this group declining from 79% in 1992 to 48% in 2004. Similarly, the 25-34 year old bracket displayed a decline from 80% in 1992 to 56% in 2004.

GRAPH 3:
ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERN, by age (a)



(a) As a proportion of people in each age group.

Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)*

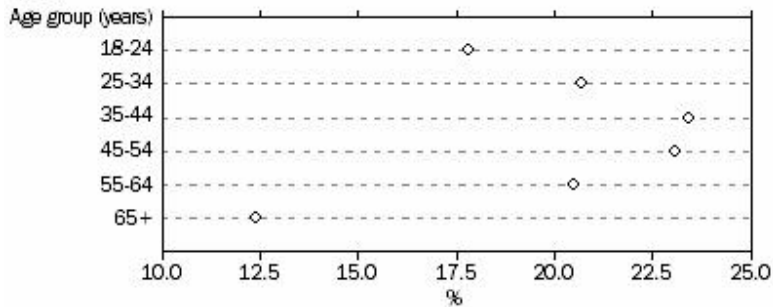
Level of concern about the environment

While people may state they are concerned about the environment, a more informative measure of their concern may be what they have done about their concerns. For example, formally registering their concerns or donating time and money towards environmental protection would suggest a greater concern than merely reporting concern but no action. In 2004, 7% of Australians aged 18 and over registered their concern by writing letters, telephoning, participating in a demonstration, signing a petition or making some other source of official expression. This is a similar rate to that recorded in 2001 (8%) and down slightly from the 10% in 1992. Interestingly, the older age cohorts are more like to register an environmental concern when compared with the younger adults. This trend has occurred in the survey results over the years, the exception being the 65 years and over age group which tend to show a low level of concern for environmental problems.

The donating of time or money to environmental protection has also remained reasonably stable between 1992 and 2004 at around one in five adults. The relative rate of participation in environmental activities by people in different age groups generally reflects their level of concern over the survey period, with a participation rate and donation rate peaking in the 45-54 age group before starting to decline in the older age groups (Graph 4).

GRAPH 4

ADULTS WHO DONATED TIME OR MONEY TO ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION (a) — 2004



(a) As a proportion of people in each age group.

Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices*, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)

The main reason stated for non-involvement in environmental actions has remained constant over the years as "no time for involvement".

Activities being undertaken to help the environment

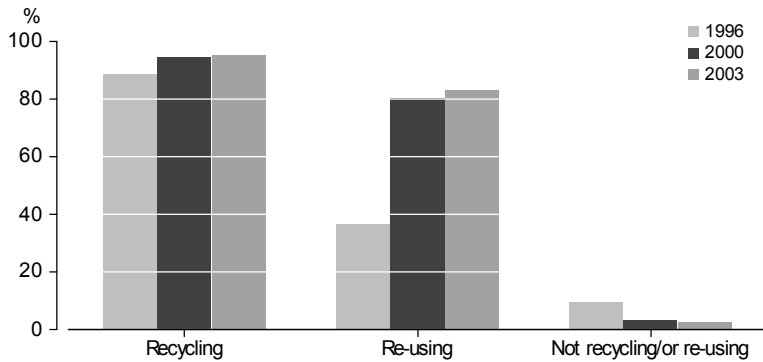
There are a large number of activities that Australians can and do undertake to help minimise environmental impact. These activities occur in a number of ways including conserving natural resources, recycling and reusing resources, to the use of more energy efficient or environmentally friendly products. Such activities are beneficial to the environment and are on the rise in Australian households by limiting natural resource consumption.

Recycling

Most households have embraced recycling with around 95% of all households undertaking some form of recycling. This participation rate has remained at this high level for approximately the last 10 years (Graph 5). Similarly, the reuse of waste grew rapidly between 1996 and 2000, rising from 37% in 1996 to 81% in 2000, and has levelled out at 83% in 2003. Reuse of waste involves using an item more than once either for its original purpose, or for a different purpose. For example, glass jars may be reused for storage; and plastic shopping bags may be reused for shopping or as garbage bags.

GRAPH 5

RECYCLING/RE-USE OF WASTE IN HOUSEHOLDS



Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices, March 2003 (cat. no. 4602.0)*

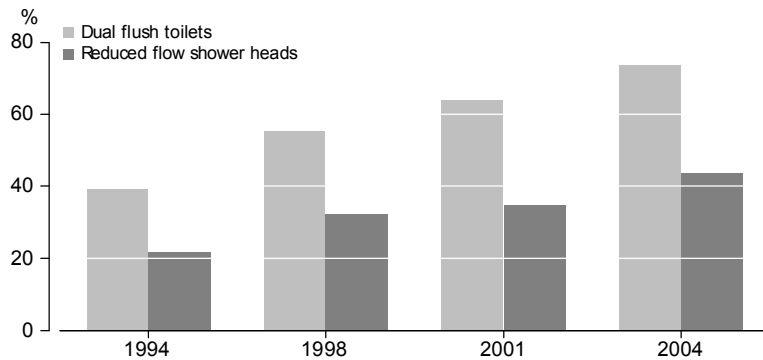
It appears that one of the early drivers of participation of households in recycling and reusing is the presence of children in the households. Households with children constantly demonstrate a higher participation rate than those households without children.

Water conservation

Increasing numbers of Australian households are now practising water conservation in the both the house and garden. This practice has been necessitated by the recent drought conditions and associated water restrictions. The use of more water efficient products within the house such as reduced flow shower heads and dual flush toilets has been growing since the surveys began (Graph 6). Other conservation methods, such as taking shorter showers and only washing full loads of clothes in the washing machine, are being implemented to varying degrees.

GRAPH 6.

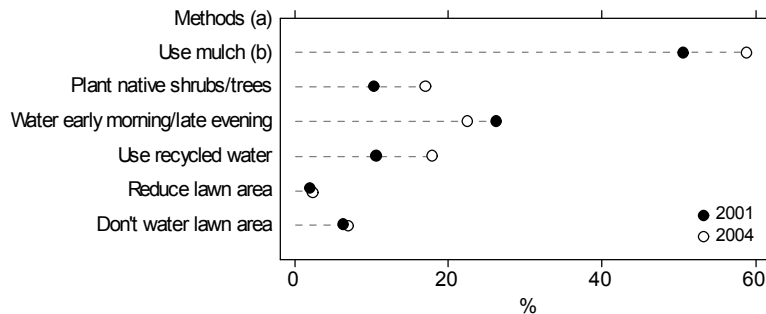
WATER CONSERVATION DEVICES USED



Source: *Environmental Issues; People's Views and Practices, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)*

Nearly half of all domestic water use occurs outside the house such as in the garden. In 1994 more than 90% of Australian households reported conserving water in the garden. Mulching was the most popular water conserving practice, used by 59% of Australian household (up from 51% in 2001). Other water conservation measures applied in the garden also appear to be increasing (Graph 7).

GRAPH 7.
WATER CONSERVATION MEASURES IN HOUSEHOLDS WITH GARDENS



(a) More than one method may be specified.

(b) Includes only those households who used mulch, or planted native shrubs or trees specifically to conserve water.

Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)*

Energy efficient products

The number of Australia households incorporating energy saving measures into their dwellings is increasing, but the overall level of household energy consumption is still increasing. The cause of the increase is due to a number of different factors including an increase in the number of households, and an increase in the use of energy intensive appliances. For example, there was a significant increase in the number of households with air coolers (i.e. air conditioners and evaporative coolers) rising from 35% of dwellings in 1994 to 60% in 2005. Similar trends are also occurring with other appliances such as dishwashers, computers and video recorders. Additionally, there is an increase in the number and range of appliances per dwelling. For example, one third (33%) of households had more than one refrigerator in 2005.

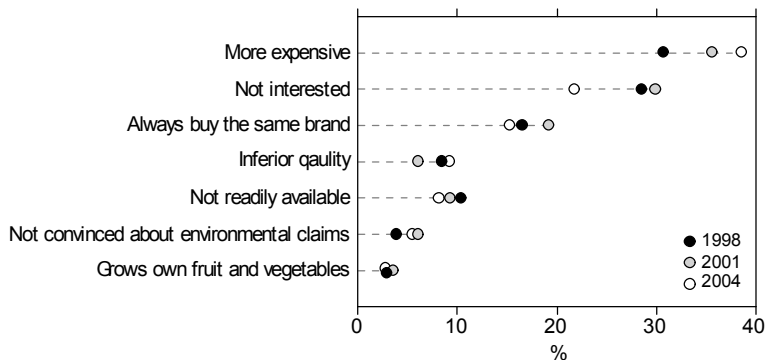
Electricity remained the main source of energy for Australian households in 2005. Green power schemes which offer customers the option to pay a premium for electricity generated from renewable sources are available in all Australian states and territories with the exception of the Northern Territory (Tasmania offers no green power scheme as its power is predominantly sourced from hydro electricity). The awareness of green power schemes in Australia (excluding Tasmania and the Northern Territory) continues to rise with 29% of households in 2005 reporting they were aware of green power schemes, up from 19% in 1999. Of the dwellings not connected to green power, most were not even aware that such green power schemes existed nor were they willing to pay more for electricity generated from green power. As such, green power will need to be financially comparable with other power sources to encourage wide spread adoption by consumers.

Use of environmentally friendly products

In 2004, almost nine in ten households in Australia (89%) reported purchasing environmentally friendly products (EFPs): a similar proportion to that recorded in 2001. The production and use of EFPs typically have less impact on environmental condition and human health. They may be products made from recycled/recyclable material or products that aim to reduce chemical hazards e.g. unbleached papers. The two most commonly purchased EFPs were recycled paper products (used by 67% of households) and products with refillable containers (used by 65% of households). Between 2001 and 2004 the use of most EFPs showed a small decline in their usage.

Cost is the most important reason why households do not purchase and use EFPs. Like green energy, the cost and quality of EFPs will need to be comparable with the regular product before widespread use occurs (Graph 8).

GRAPH 8
REASONS ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY PRODUCTS NOT USED



Source: *Environmental Issues: People's Views and Practices, March 2004 (cat. no. 4602.0)*