



Progress vs. Pessimism: Environment Doing Better Than Most Realize

by Samuel Walker

Summary

Public opinion about the environment is often marked by unwarranted pessimism about the state of our air, water, and natural resources. But the most recent government data show that America in general, and Michigan in particular, have seen impressive gains in environmental quality since the first Earth Day 30 years ago.

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Opinion polls consistently show that Americans are pessimistic about the environment. For example, a Wirthlin Group poll last year showed that 75 percent of Americans believe environmental problems will get worse during their lifetime. But such pessimism is not only unwarranted, it may be preventing us from recognizing the great progress we've already made.

The 30th anniversary of Earth Day last month provided us with an opportunity to depart from the usual fare of doomsday predictions and point out one little-noticed but significant fact: In the past three decades, America in general, and Michigan in particular, have seen substantial improvements in environmental quality—improvements that will almost certainly continue in the future.

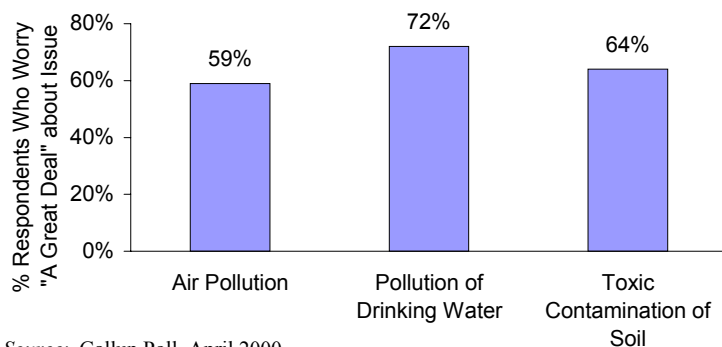
What about the impact of the automobile on environmental quality? According to a report compiled by the Pacific Research Institute and the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, new cars today emit less than 5 percent as much pollution as they did at the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, a fact that accounts for a large portion of the improvement in air quality.

While many give sole credit for achieving these results to government-mandated environmental policy, it is important to note that the auto industry has been at the forefront of efforts to apply technological innovation to reducing air pollution. In fact, there are clear signs that U.S. automakers are looking farther ahead than legislation can contemplate.

Experiments with fuel-cell and other cutting-edge technologies suggest that zero- or near zero-emission autos are within the foreseeable future. In the meantime, Volvo has introduced a car equipped with a radiator covered in a special coating that purportedly converts ozone smog into oxygen at rates that exceed the ozone-forming chemicals emitted by the car. In other words, driving this car will actually clean up

the air. The coating is not yet affordable for the mass market, but it is an example of the kind of innovation that industry is now developing on its own.

Despite Positive Trends, Most Americans Fear Environmental Degradation



Source: Gallup Poll, April 2000

As a matter of fact, air quality is one of the great Michigan success stories. Michigan cities monitored by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are below the health-based thresholds set by the Clean Air Act for all six “criteria” pollutants—lead, carbon monoxide, ozone, particulates, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide—and are experiencing downward trends.

Most Michigan cities not only meet the national standard, but are below the national average. The one exception is Detroit, which is slightly above the national average for particulates and sulfur dioxide. But on the plus side, the Foundation for Clean Air Progress in Washington, D.C. lists Detroit as one of the nation’s 10 best cities in terms of ozone reductions over the last decade.

Michigan also has a superior record in monitoring water quality, and has impressive results to report. While all 50 states taken together only assessed 17 percent of their rivers, streams, and lakes in the 1996 National Water Quality Inventory, Michigan assessed 40 percent. Of those, 93 percent were deemed “fully supporting,” which means they are safe for both swimming and fishing. Today, it is once again possible to fish in the Great Lakes, and even to drink their water in most locations.

The most significant threat to ecological balance in the Great Lakes no longer comes mainly from industrial pollution or toxics, but from biological threats. The proliferation of zebra mussels, a non-native species that has entered the region chiefly in the ballast water of cargo ships, currently presents one of the more significant environmental challenges for Lake Michigan and other Great Lakes.

What about pollution of our land by toxic waste? Nationwide, the EPA shows a 42-percent decline in “toxics releases” since 1988, a reduction of nearly 1.5 billion pounds. The chemical industry, not surprisingly, has shown the largest decrease, with a 50.8-percent reduction since 1988.

As we begin the 21st century, environmental discourse is showing signs of maturing. Thirty years ago, most companies thought environmental protection would be ruinously expensive, while many environmentalists were pessimistic that substantial improvements were even possible.

Both sides turned out to be wrong. Often, the cost of government-mandated regulatory solutions was unnecessarily high because regulators underestimated the ingenuity and productivity of U.S. businesses. This suggests that environmental policy may slowly become less adversarial in character, evolving into the consensus issue it was expected to be at the time of the first Earth Day.

And that’s reason for celebration.

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(Samuel Walker, communications specialist for the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy, adapted this essay from the Center’s new report, “*Environmental Quality 2000: Assessing Michigan and America at the 30th Anniversary of Earth Day*,” which can be viewed at www.mackinac.org. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted provided the author and his affiliation are cited.)

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