

Science for Environment Policy

Waste management is prioritised by the public as an environmental behaviour

A US-based study has confirmed the prominent position that recycling and personal waste management take in the public consciousness. Crucially, the researchers suggest that understanding the popularity of such waste-management activities could help policymakers promote other forms of pro-environmental behaviour.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the idea of solid waste as a serious environmental issue was heavily promoted to the public. Advertising campaigns, media attention and the support of social science research all helped to make recycling a routine activity throughout much of the EU, as well as the wider industrialised world.

However, the focus among environmentalists has shifted in recent years. Researchers no longer see waste management in itself as a major barrier to a greener world, but instead focus on more systemic challenges, such as climate change and water shortages. This can be observed in UNEP's Emerging Issues in Our Global Environment series, in which waste management is conspicuous only by its absence.

The researchers explain that the planet is facing many environmental challenges that require a *range* of responses from the human population, including changing behaviour related to transport, food, purchasing and numerous other aspects of life. They set out to explore the extent of environmental behaviours among residents of the San Francisco Bay Area to see if they match the concerns of environmental scientists.

They conducted a telephone survey with 1 201 residents, as well as 14 community listening sessions comprising small focus-group-style gatherings with community institutions that included a total of 115 participants. Questions were asked regarding participants' environmental concerns and what actions they may consequently be motivated to take.

In the listening sessions, researchers asked open-ended questions about three behavioural areas: food; modes of transport; and outdoor activity. Despite a lack of prompting, waste management was one of the most common activities discussed, indicating that waste-management activities, such as recycling, litter-picking and composting, are most prominent in people's minds when they think about 'acting environmentally'. The survey revealed that the participation rate in such activities exceeded all other environmental behaviours by at least 30%, including behaviours related to transport, environmentally related eating habits and sustainable purchasing, which the researchers identified as being central to everyday life activities.

To understand why waste management is still so strongly equated with 'being green', and whether it indicates engagement with broader issues, the researchers analysed participants' motivations. The key factors the researchers identified were: task characteristics (for example, recycling is relatively easy and tangible), external influences (behaviours becoming 'the norm' among peers) and internal psychological processes (such as feelings of guilt).

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It seems that the participants had embraced responsible waste management in an effort to be environmentally conscious citizens; most, however, had adopted few other behaviours that address more systemic issues, such as the greater issue of over-consumption.

The study's authors suggest that the sentiments behind the participants' waste-management behaviour are positive and could be harnessed to establish other environmental behaviours. Specifically, facilitating pro-environmental behaviours through infrastructure and promoting them as social and internal norms will likely encourage their uptake.

The authors also note that their results from the famously 'green' San Francisco Bay Area may not be applicable in less environmentally conscious places. They therefore emphasise the importance of undertaking similar studies in different settings. In a European context, this might mean assessing the motivations of residents from countries with varying levels of recycling implementation. Understanding how people in these different 'recycling contexts' think about and prioritise pro-environmental behaviours would help to explain the interplay of institutional, social and internal factors that may support or hinder uptake of waste management, and by extension other pro-environmental behaviours. Once again, better understanding of these mechanisms and processes may help with the uptake of other behaviours that tackle systemic issues.



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