



The Ocean Project

Summary Analysis of Six Focus Groups

May 1999

Introduction

In a series of focus groups for The Ocean Project, Belden Russonello & Stewart, in collaboration with American Viewpoint, explored the public's connections, values, attitudes, and knowledge relating to the oceans. Our goal was to better understand what needs to be communicated to build awareness and to increase people's concern about the health of the oceans.

Six focus groups were conducted in Baltimore, St. Louis, and Chicago in April 1999 among adults who have visited a zoo, aquarium, or science museum in the last two years. The groups were separated by gender to facilitate candid, in-depth discussions, and they included a mix of ages, races, education, and income levels.

These focus groups are the second phase of a research project designed to examine attitudes on the oceans, and the ways in which aquariums, zoos, and museums may raise awareness. The first phase of the research consisted of a review of existing public opinion data, which is reported separately. The focus groups are intended to inform the design of the next phase of the research -- a large national opinion survey.

This summary analysis of the focus groups identifies the currents of public opinion uncovered in the groups that are relevant to building public commitment to the oceans, and provides guidance on the important themes to measure in the national poll.

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Analysis

Overview. Aquariums, zoos, and science museums have a unique opportunity to educate the public about the importance of oceans. At the moment, participants in our discussions are not generally concerned about the health of the oceans, and we find many only possess a very basic understanding of the oceans, their functions, and their connections to human survival. However, communicating to the public with facts alone may not increase the saliency of these issues. To raise concern and urgency, we must link factual information about the oceans and the threats to them with people's values and everyday lives.

The focus group phase of this research project begins to provide an understanding of what needs to be communicated in order to raise concerns about the health of the oceans. Our analysis identifies eleven key points about public attitudes toward the oceans.

1. *Personal connections to oceans are limited to beaches and recreational aspects.*

When asked about the most beautiful place on earth, a few participants in each group raise the oceans or beaches. Participants' main personal connections and experiences with the oceans are through beaches, cruises, and for a few, snorkeling and diving. For most of the participants, their personal connections do not extend far beyond the shoreline.

“The beaches are just fun. I could go out there and dive in the water or go roller skating, play volleyball. There was so much to do. It was entertaining.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

2. *Oceans evoke emotions and strong feelings.* Many of the participants, particularly the women in Baltimore and San Jose, express an emotional connection to the oceans, describing the oceans in terms of how oceans make them feel. Participants often describe the oceans as:

“relaxing”
“powerful”
“awe inspiring”
“mysterious”
“peaceful”

The groups discussions raised the possibility of men and women having different connections and attachments to the oceans. We will use the survey phase of the research to more sharply define these possible gender differences.

“Power, the power of the ocean. I like to go because I feel nice and humble. I need to get to the ocean once a year to tune my metronome. It is there and it is bigger than I am. I personally need that.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

“It's very calming. Especially right at either the sunrise or the sunset. It's is very calming just to throw your blanket down and sit down and just chill.” -- *Woman, St. Louis*

“I think solitude. When I go to the beach or the ocean, I am usually alone. It's a good place for thinking and reflecting.” -- *Woman, San Jose*

“I tend to think of freedom when you look out, and when I see it.” -- *Man, St. Louis*

Statements about the threats to oceans also elicit an emotional response from some of the participants. Anger, sadness, respect for the oceans, and guilt are all emotions some participants express as they begin to learn about the destruction caused by humans. However, not all are moved by these threats. Some participants remain unaffected by messages about pollution, overfishing, and coastal development.

“It makes me feel more sad than angry. My anger is not as powerful as my sadness, and I think that some of them, there are some ways that we can resolve some of the things. I'm just not sure how to do that, and I don't think that myself alone can do that. I think that as a community, and as a whole nation, I think everybody's going to have to pitch in to do that.” -
- *Woman, San Jose*

These associations with the oceans and threats to them tell us that an awareness campaign has a host of emotional connections to build upon. The next steps will be to strengthen this emotional link and fill in the gaps of knowledge as aquariums, zoos, and museums look to raise awareness and concerns about the health of the oceans.

3. *Oceans seen as vast, alive, and maybe indestructible.* Large, durable, and permanent are dominant characteristics participants ascribe to the oceans. These qualities weigh heavily on attitudes toward the oceans and threats to ocean health. For many participants, this imagery leaves them awestruck by the power and beauty of the oceans, and communicates that there is a great deal more to save than previously thought. However, at the same time, the vastness of the oceans reinforces the message that the oceans are impermeable to long term destruction.

As the OAC communicates about the oceans, it will be important to remember that evoking the vastness of the oceans may be counterproductive for a segment of the public. For some focus group participants the fact that the oceans are a “vast home” makes it easier for them to dismiss claims of the need to protect the oceans.

“There is just so much... when you look at the ocean, it is so large. You just swim out and keep going if you wanted to, on a boat or whatever..You can get away from everything or everybody if you want to.” -- *Man, St. Louis*

“I put the oceans are important because it is one of the things that we all expect will always be there for us to enjoy one way or another.” -- *Woman, St. Louis*

“Maybe that’s another thing. You can count on the ocean always being there, and always working, always in motion.” -- *Woman, San Jose*

“I think it’s tough to keep them down. I mean, I don’t think we are going to -- I don’t know. How hard man tries to destroy something, I think it always has the resilience to come right back and mend itself.” -- *Man, San Jose*

Most participants also consider the oceans “alive” because they contain and support life. Some go further, seeing the oceans as a living body, constantly in motion.

“The fact that it supports so much life, and also it supports us in many ways, for food and water and different things. It provides a livelihood for people.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

“I think it seems alive because it is constantly in motion. It is always moving.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

“If you go to the right places, there are all different kinds of fish. There are schools of fish, and there are currents that move back and forth underneath, and the colors always change. There's just every color you can imagine, and if you get lucky, then you get to dive with a whale or something like that, and you see this great big huge thing going right past you.”
-- *Man, St. Louis*

4. Importance of oceans is linked to human survival, but understanding is limited.

Participants feel strongly that the oceans are important to human survival and should be protected. However, the connections among the oceans and humans are not fully understood. When asked why oceans are important, many respond simply, “we can’t live without them.” In very general terms, participants talk about the oceans as important because:

- they regulate the weather;
- they contain a variety of life;
- they are part of the circle of life that connects all living things;
- they provide fishing, shipping and travel; and
- they provide enjoyment and recreation.

“Oceans are important because they're life sustaining through their direct influence on climatic changes on the land masses. Without them you would have no life because things would not grow...” -- *Man, Baltimore*

“There’s probably 100 million reasons that we have to protect the ocean...because it does affect the weather and the climate in certain areas when you get your rain when you need it, and you get other types of weather around, and there’s just a vast array of all kind of minerals, foods, and just vegetation under the ocean that can be pulled out, turned into food for here, there, everywhere.” -- *Man, San Jose*

“Provides a home for a multitude of sea life and plants, and recreation for people. Endless source of water...” -- *Woman, St. Louis*

When pushed to expand on these themes and express in more specific detail the importance of the oceans, most participants falter and respond generally that the oceans are an integral part of human survival.

“I think a healthy ocean is a healthy earth and a sick ocean is a very sick earth. it is really very crucial, the ocean staying healthy.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

5. *Protecting oceans lacks urgency.* At the moment, the oceans are not perceived to be in immediate danger by our participants. Consequently, while all agree on the importance of the oceans and the marine life they support, the need for action to protect the oceans is not readily apparent.

Our focus group participants echoed the national survey data which have shown that Americans believe the oceans are in fair condition. Most believe the oceans have been harmed by oil spills, pollution generally, and tourism, but these are not viewed as devastating. Many also point to declines in fish stocks, beach closings, and the destruction of coral reefs as evidence that the oceans are only in fair condition. Some participants in the discussions believe the oceans are in good condition because of efforts over the last few years to curb pollution. In sum, most participants see reason for concern, but do not possess a sense of urgency because they fail to see a direct connection to their lives.

6. *Skepticism about the extent of damage and human potential to destroy the oceans.* Because of a limited understanding of the oceans and how they function, many participants, especially the men, raise questions about the extent of damage done to oceans, the permanency of this damage, and the possibility that humans could destroy the oceans. These participants believe oil spills, other forms of pollution, destructive fishing practices, and other threats to the oceans affect only a small part of the oceans at a time. Because oceans are so vast and some believe “self cleaning,” these participants do not believe humans can cause lasting harm to the oceans. The harm caused by humans is considered minuscule in comparison to the vastness of the oceans. To these participants, the oceans are more powerful than the human capacity to harm them, so a warning that we are “destroying” the oceans lacks credibility. To this audience, a message that oceans are being “damaged” may be more acceptable.

“I don't know percentage wise how much the ocean can take and how much we're dumping. Obviously it's a bad thing, I'm not saying it's a good thing but it's something you see that the earth can take a lot of hits and still stay alive. It's not something that concerns me at this stage.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

“We have probably done some damage, but because it is so big it would take more than what we have done. I think people are becoming aware. So I think it is not going to continue to deteriorate, but only improve at this point. I think we are just lucky that it is as big as it is.” -
- *Woman, Baltimore*

“I was just thinking about pollution and how it affects the ocean. Mitch was right. It's only a very tiny area, considering the whole picture and the size of the oceans it doesn't affect. What happened in Alaska doesn't affect anything even on the coast of California. It just affected that one tiny area. The people working there, the fishermen there. As far as other people in the world, there's no real effect on them.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

“If they are covering 95 percent of the world, how are you going to pollute it all? That is my theory on that. I'm not worried about it.” -- *Man, St. Louis*

“It's vast, and it will disperse a lot of stuff because of the way it works and the tides and things moving back and forth, moving in circular motions and things like that. It does a great job of spreading things out.” -- *Man, St. Louis*

“I keeping thinking, like we were talking about it being a living organism. When we get a cut our body heals itself. I think the ocean to a point can heal itself. To a point.” -- *Woman, San Jose*

7. ***Pollution is seen as most direct threat to the health of the oceans.*** Participants consider pollution in its many forms the biggest threat to the oceans. Oil spills, run-off, and dumping are all volunteered as examples of pollution. Participants generally point their fingers at industry as the main culprit in polluting the oceans, but they do not absolve individuals' role. Many believe everyone -- industry, government, and individuals -- needs to take responsibility for protecting the oceans.

“I still worry about industrial dumping. I still don't know what the DuPonts and other industries in the world are putting in like mercury or metallic waste or manure waste from the Eastern Shore, or whatever. It collectively goes into the water and finds it's way into some major ocean.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

“I think basically what he said, all the garbage and stuff we dump in the rivers, goes to the oceans. Water flows downhill. It goes to the ocean. We have cities taking barge loads of garbage and dumping it in the ocean. That's polluting the ocean, and a lot of that stuff is poison. It comes back in the food chain. It's in the fish you eat. It's in the water you drink.”
-- *Man, St. Louis*

When presented with information about the many threats to the oceans' health, pollution is generally more understandable and found to be more troubling than overfishing, other harmful fishing practices, and coastal development. Pollution is viewed as the umbrella problem which impacts all others. For example, many surmise that pollution is causing a drop in fish stocks and exacerbating the problems caused by poor fishing practices, while coastal development is a threat to the oceans because of the pollution it causes.

While pollution is better understood by participants as a threat to the oceans and is seen as having the most direct impact on human health, many participants also express concerns about the harm caused by coastal development and overfishing, when they are presented with information. However, most participants are less likely to raise these threats themselves. More education which links the impacts of overfishing and coastal development to human well being may be needed to raise awareness and concern over these issues.

8. ***Values are key.*** In raising awareness of the oceans, communications need to speak to the values that underlie the public's concerns about the oceans. As with many environmental issues, we find the values that motivate ocean concerns relate strongly to protecting oneself and family and a responsibility to future generations. Participants draw the most direct links between these values and protection of the oceans when threats to human health are raised.

“When you use the words of chronic disease, reproductive failure, deformity, it kind of hits home to a lot of people. It does to me.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

An appreciation of nature's beauty and preserving nature for its own sake are also important to some participants, as well as the value of individual responsibility -- minimizing damage done to the earth by humans' presence. The following quotes illustrate how participants describe each value in their own words:

Protecting self and family

"[The oceans] are part of our ecological system, and if it deteriorates, we are not going to be able to eat and breathe. It's as simple as that." -- *Man, St. Louis*

Future generations

"I would want my children and future generations to be able to enjoy it." -- *Woman, Baltimore*

"We have a responsibility to unborn generations to leave the planet intact." -- *Man, Baltimore*

"I would like my grandkids and their grandkids to be able to see the same things that I have seen, not just developments all over the coast that you can't see the natural resources of this world." -- *Man, St. Louis*

Aesthetic value

"They are important because the oceans reflect the beauty and power of nature."
-- *Woman, San Jose*

"Well, before too long, it's not going to be so beautiful any more. It is going to be so polluted from people not caring, that it is not going to be a beautiful place to visit any more. Who is going to care about going and seeing the ocean any more, because it is going to be so yucky." -- *Woman, St. Louis*

"I put down that they add beauty to the world. You can travel on them for pleasure, different cruises and what not." -- *Man, St. Louis*

Individual responsibility

"We should be responsible people and leave as much as we took, not just take and not leave anything. That's what's happening in this world. Everybody takes, but they never leave anything." -- *Man, St. Louis*

"Because that is part of the world we live in. If for no other reason, why shouldn't we keep our house clean?" -- *Man, St. Louis*

9. Two conditions for increasing concern: human impact and realistic solutions.

Communications about the oceans are most effective at increasing concern under two conditions: 1) when they describe a possible direct impact on people's lives, and 2) when they convey an easily-implemented solution to threats to the oceans' health.

“The importance that the oceans have on our lives. I think it's a very important fact. Explain to people why the oceans are important, what they do and the global effect. How they sustain us and keep us alive. I think this is major information that people should know. That will hopefully make them realize that it is something that we should try to save or keep alive or pollute less.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

Human impact: Of all the information presented in the groups, the most salient is the fact that 70% of oxygen is produced by the oceans. Almost all participants immediately see the connection between the oceans' oxygen production and their own health.

Information about fish as a principal source of protein for one-sixth of the world is less resonant with participants. This fact of the oceans is too remote for many of the participants, and is seen as affecting other countries, especially poorer ones, but not having as direct an impact on their lives.

“I think one nice thing that this does, because as we comment on aquariums or educational centers not telling us that the basic things we need to do to change, a lot of information that we get is nice to know, but it doesn't tell me how it affects me. The word oxygen here, it is a key to life. It is a little bit more direct to my day-to-day life than climate or global or things like that. So I think this statement to me is more powerful than this first one, because this foos with my oxygen, which is something I know I need day-to-day. This gets to us, a down to earth fact.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

“...whereas some people here don't eat fish, in other countries that is just about all they eat. So, that be some concern, thinking of those people, and again, it's still nice to know.” -- *Woman, St. Louis*

Easily implemented solutions: Oil spills, harmful fishing practices that are wasteful and destructive, and coastal development are viewed as the most egregious examples of damage to the oceans because participants believe they can and should be easily addressed through government regulation. On the other hand, information about nutrient pollution presents a less compelling case for raising concern. Many of the participants view nutrient pollution as “necessary” pollution and do not readily see a solution to this problem.

“Well the swordfish being caught before they have a chance to reproduce. That is something that we know and we’re stupid if we don’t regulate that in some fashion.”
-- *Man, Baltimore*

“To me, the problem is that most of the things that are causing the pollution are things that we still need to have, regardless of what they’re doing to the ocean. What are we going to do with waste? Where does it go? Is there another method that we can use to get rid of the waste? You’re always going to have human feces. You’re always going to have chicken feces.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

“You can’t hardly quit fertilizing and stuff so we can grow our food and other plants and stuff.” -- *Woman, St. Louis*

10. *Communicate about habitats.* Communications about habitats generate more concern in the groups about the overall health of the oceans than focusing on specific marine life and fish. Habitats reinforce the belief that everything is connected and should be protected, as well as the belief that when we save a habitat we also save the life it supports. For example, when participants are informed that coral reefs are home to 25% of all species of marine life and fish, their concern about the health of coral reefs increases.

“I know that a lot of species come in the coral reefs to feed, and I can’t imagine anything worse than destroying the feeding grounds for a lot of species. If you want to talk about damage to the ecosystem, then I would imagine damage in the coral reefs would be hitting right to the core.” -- *Man, San Jose*

“Everybody needs equal protection. We need to protect ourselves as much as we need to protect the animals around us, because we all interact, and you get rid of one and it is going to affect somebody else, whether we see them as a food source, which is our primary level and our primary concern, or if we see them as a cog in the entire wheel.” -- *Woman, Baltimore*

“I think it’s very important [to protect habitats]. If that is where the fish are living, you don’t protect that, and you are not going to have fish for very long.” -- *Man, St. Louis*

While almost everyone in the groups expresses concern about the balance of nature and the need to preserve marine life, there are two arguments that participants raise as to why *all* species cannot be protected: 1) it is impossible to save *all* species and 2) natural extinction. Both of these are minority opinions expressed in the groups, but important to recognize as possible challenges that communications may face, especially if the campaign focuses on specific species instead of habitats.

“If you want to feel good about saving a species, because you think that it's something that is the right thing to do, okay, that's a good thing. You're a good person. That's a nice thing to do. Do I think it's needed? Scientists say that in billions of years, things have come and gone and man was the last to come. We really didn't have any effect on those things and the earth is still around. Everything is still going. As much pollutants as we put in the air, I think the percentage of carbon dioxide went up 0.2 percent since the industrial revolution. On a large scale...obviously if you have species and you're causing them to die out, that's not a good thing, but that's what happens to the world. Things come and things go. That's the cycle and it goes on and on. To me it seems like everything just keeps going. It's not really a problem. If you want to feel good to save things then that's a commendable thing.” -- *Man, Baltimore*

11. Link factual information and values. We have begun to uncover in the focus group phase of this research the most effective ways to link the values and emotions toward the oceans with factual information about the oceans in order to raise concern. Some promising pieces of information and their values connections include:

Information	Values
<p>Oceans regulate climate and produce 70% of our oxygen.</p> <p>Threats to human health.</p>	<p>Protecting self and family: oceans as an integral part of human survival</p> <p>Future generations: concern about leaving the planet livable for those to come</p>
<p>Oceans contain numerous habitats that support marine life and fish. One example are coral reefs which are home to 25% of all species of marine life and fish.</p>	<p>Future generations: concern about leaving the planet livable for those to come</p> <p>Circle of life: all life is connected. If we damage one part of the circle, humans and other species will suffer</p> <p>Aesthetic and recreational: habitats provide beauty and recreation</p>
<p>Pollution in the form of oil spills and runoff from urban streets and farms.</p> <p>Coastal development destroying habitats and causing more pollution.</p> <p>Overfishing and other harmful fishing practices.</p>	<p>Protecting self and family: oceans are an integral part of human survival, part of economy</p> <p>Future generations: concern about leaving the planet livable for those to come</p> <p>Responsibility: individual responsibility to minimize damage done to the earth by our actions</p> <p>Aesthetic and recreational: habitats provide beauty and recreation</p>

Conclusions

The size of the oceans is the most common imagery raised by participants in the discussions. Most view the oceans as large and durable. While this imagery leaves many awestruck by the power and vastness of the oceans, it is also a barrier to raising concerns about the health of the oceans.

In the discussion groups, some participants express the belief that the oceans are “self-cleaning” and are so large that pollution and other human activity cannot do irreparable damage. In addition, most people do not have daily exposure to the oceans, and see the oceans as distant and the threats to them long term. They value the oceans, but their understanding of why we need the oceans is superficial. Consequently, while many participants express an emotional connection to the oceans, awareness and concerns about the oceans’ health are low and need to be raised.

The focus groups uncovered a number of openings through which aquariums, zoos, and museums can build greater understanding and raise awareness and concerns about the oceans. These will be examined more closely in the survey component of the research and include:

- ***Emotional connection.*** Many participants, particularly the women, express a personal and sometimes spiritual connection with the oceans. These connections are an opening through which we can begin to discuss the threats to the oceans and increase concerns.
- ***Vague sense that the oceans are essential to humans.*** Almost all the participants agree that the oceans are an integral part of human survival, but most have only a general idea of how the oceans and human well being are connected. The OAC may not have to spend resources convincing Americans that the oceans are important to their lives. However, communications need to convey the urgency of these issues and expand on the links the public already makes.
- ***Oceans as habitats.*** The oceans evoke the imagery of the circle of life for many people because oceans are habitats themselves. This is a strong image to project and build upon, since the public is more likely to endorse protecting habitats than protecting individual species.
- ***Many solutions are seen as achievable.*** While the oceans are considered vast and the threats troubling, most participants are not hopeless about protecting the oceans. There are solutions that participants embrace because they are seen as easily achieved. For example, controlling overfishing and harmful fishing practices and reducing coastal development are often viewed as easily accomplished and sensible.
- ***Possible differences between men and women.*** While the focus group findings are not projectable, we did uncover some potential gender differences. The women in the

discussion groups tended to express a more emotional connection to the oceans and a desire to protect them. On the other hand, many of the men were more detached and questioned the degree to which humans could harm the oceans. We will examine these differences more closely in the survey.

The focus group analysis suggests some preliminary guidelines to consider when communicating about the oceans:

- Recognize that reinforcing the image of the vastness or size of the ocean may send a message that oceans are not in danger. Communications need to demonstrate the oceans' fragility and vulnerability to human activity.
- Connect to people's lives and human health issues. For example, inform the public about the oceans' role in oxygen production and expand on Americans' knowledge of the oceans' connection to their lives. In this way, we hope to bridge the distance between people's lives and their experiences with the oceans, in order to increase concern.
- Begin by focusing on problems and solutions that appear to be easily solved, such as oil spills and overfishing. This will help avoid people feeling overwhelmed and helpless on these issues. Rather, communications need to empower individuals so that they can make a difference.
- Similarly, the messages need to be simple. Individuals can easily become overwhelmed and confused with too much information.
- Connect to values. Frame ocean protection in the context of what drives Americans' concerns about the oceans: A desire to protect themselves and their families; a responsibility to leave future generations a healthy planet; and an appreciation of nature's beauty, as embodied in the oceans.
- Include a focus on habitats.