



# How green is my valley? Perceptions and concerns for the environment

As the level of concern for the natural environment increases, more and more studies attempt to understand the intricate relationship between livelihood issues and environmental concerns. As evidence emerges, these studies increasingly point out that environmental matters are associated with complex economic and social processes, as this article by *Jaré Struwig, Ben Roberts and Steven Gordon* shows.

## Data

In 2010, a module on public attitudes towards the environment and pro-environmental behaviour was included in the South African Social Attitudes Survey (SASAS). The inclusion of this module was part of the ongoing involvement of SASAS in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). For the purpose of the study, we interviewed 3 112 South Africans, 16 years and older.

## Background

The way people view the environment depends, in part, on the material resources available to them. Evidence shows that individuals who are materially deprived are much less concerned about environmental protection. They are likely to place more emphasis on basic material needs (such as food and jobs) than on environmental issues. This previously widely accepted thesis has been recently supplemented by the environmental deprivation theory. This theory upholds that day-to-day survival is generally more important than environmental concern, but maintains that eventually it

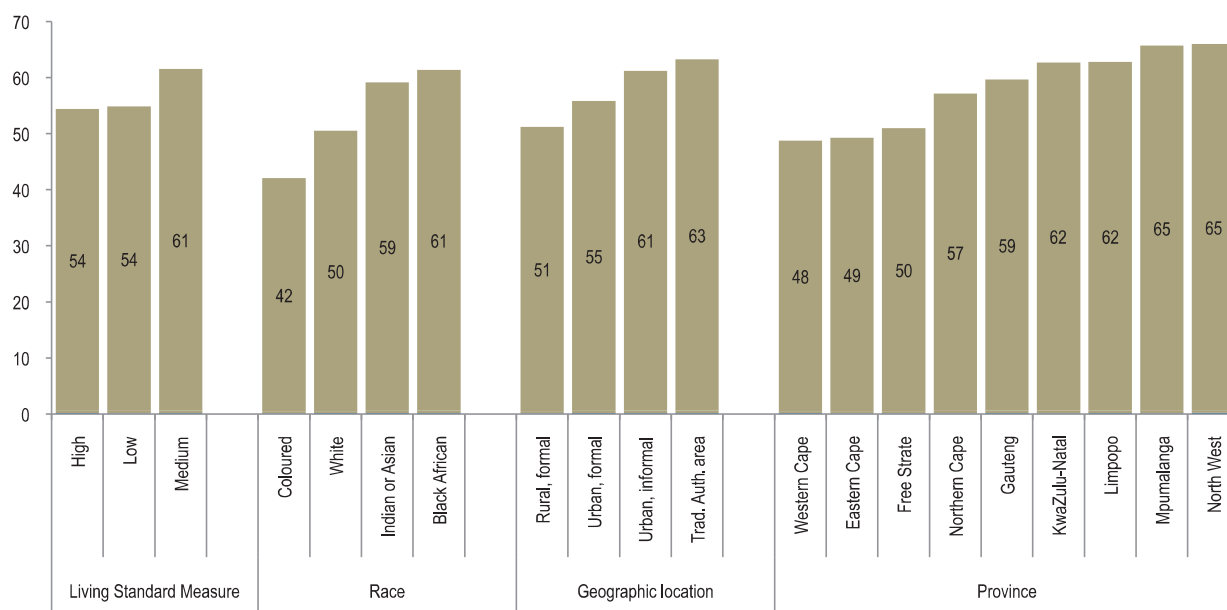
reaches a threshold, the so-called tipping point, which is crossed once the environment becomes so neglected and degraded, it is a survival concern in itself. Central to the theory is the proposal that the more someone is exposed to pollution (or other forms of environmental degradation), the greater their concern around environmental issues and the greater their dissatisfaction and the eventual public discontent.

## Environmental problems that affect everyday life

On the question as to whether environmental problems had affected their daily lives, more than half of the respondents (58%) indicated that this was the case, with just less than a quarter feeling ambivalent (neither agreeing nor disagreeing). A minority (15%) disagreed with the statement, implying that environmental problems did not affect them.

Despite the government's commitment to building sustainable communities and embracing a human rights approach for all South Africans, the occurrence of environmental problems in South Africa was still polarised along racial and geographical boundaries (Figure 1 on page 26).

Figure 1: Agreement with the statement, 'environmental problems have a direct effect on my everyday life'



Source: South African Social Attitude Survey, 2010

Environmental problems most often selected were water shortage, water pollution, air pollution and household rubbish removal.

The subgroups most affected by environmental problems were black Africans, and people residing in traditional authority areas and urban informal areas. Interestingly, in terms of living standard, people with a medium living standard measure perceived themselves to be more affected by environmental problems than people with a low or high living standard.

People residing in the Western Cape were least affected by environmental problems while environmental problems

had the largest impact on people residing in the northern provinces, notably Mpumalanga and the North West.

To contextualise the environmental problems experienced by respondents, we asked what environmental problem most affected them and their family. The problems most often selected were water shortages (27%), water pollution (16%), air pollution (15%) and household rubbish removal (15%) (Table 1).

Less than a tenth of South Africans felt affected by issues such as climate change, the use of chemicals and pesticides, nuclear waste or genetically modified foods. Regardless of geographic area, water shortage was cited as the most common problem in all areas.

As could be expected, different geographical areas experienced environmental problems differently. Compared to residents of urban formal areas, those living in urban informal areas were more likely to experience problems with a water shortage, with almost half (48%) either reporting water shortages or water pollution.

Table 1: Exposure to environmental problems by geotype

	South Africa	Urban, formal	Urban, informal	Traditional Auth. areas	Rural, formal
Water shortage	27	18	30	46	23
Water pollution	16	15	18	17	22
Air pollution	15	17	20	10	13
Household rubbish removal	11	13	12	9	10
Climate change	8	10	3	6	4
Using up natural resources	3	3	4	2	1
Chemicals and pesticides	3	4	2	1	4
Nuclear waste	2	3	1	1	2
Genetically modified foods	2	3	1	1	1
None of these	9	10	7	7	14
Cannot choose	3	4	2	1	7

Source: South African Social Attitude Survey, 2010

People residing in rural areas often rely on small-scale farming and other survivalist informal economic activities to sustain themselves. They are particularly reliant on the environment and therefore vulnerable to certain types of environmental problems due to the nature of their livelihoods. So, not surprising, water shortages and water pollution were identified as the most common environmental problems in rural areas. In particular, almost half of people residing in traditional authority areas mentioned that water shortages affected their lives. Air pollution and climate change were far less commonly identified in rural areas than in urban areas.

Environmental concern was clearly related to whether a person experienced environmental problems that affected their daily lives.

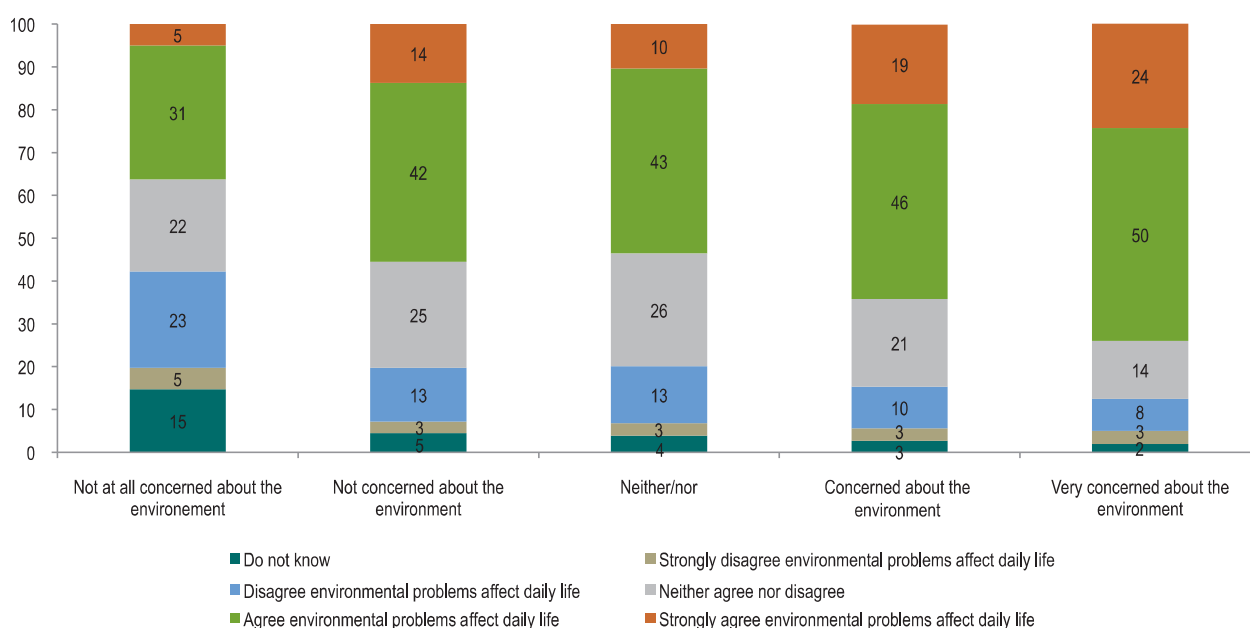
### The relationship between environmental problems and environmental concerns

One of the dangers of environmental decay is that environmental degeneration can become so severe that it affects people's livelihoods and communities start protesting. In this section we determined whether experiences of environmental problems impacted on environmental concerns. Concern for the environment was mostly interpreted in a positive way but as the deprivation theory suggests, this concern can become so severe and paramount that it becomes part of a public uproar and unrest.

As Figure 2 demonstrates, concern for the environment was clearly related to whether a person experienced environmental problems that affected their daily lives. Those who were 'concerned about the environment' or 'very concerned about the environment' were twice as likely to have stated environmental problems affected their daily lives.

Of those who were not at all concerned about the environment, only 36% agreed that they experienced environmental problems on a daily bases. This proportion incrementally increased to the extent that almost three quarters (74%) of people who were very concerned about the environment indicated that they experienced some form of environmental problem that had affected their daily lives.

Figure 2: Exposure to environmental problems and environmental concern



Source: South African Social Attitude Survey; 2010

### Conclusion

Environmental problems are closely associated and interrelated with forms of social justice, and have the potential to become intensely political since they are entrenched in access to power and resources in society. South Africa remains polarised in terms of race and geographical areas when it comes to issues of environmental resources and problems experienced, yet social and environmental policies often operate in separate silos, as though they are not interrelated. The only way to

accommodate this is to inculcate a holistic approach into communities and to draw on concepts of environmental justice that emphasise the importance of linking the struggle against human and social injustice and the exploitation of humans with the struggle of the environment. ■

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