

# Canadian Perspectives on the Ocean and Climate Change

The Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre's  
findings based on The Ocean Project's 2009 study

Summary of Key Findings  
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## Introduction

Ten years ago The Ocean Project (TOP) conducted landmark research to improve the effectiveness of aquariums, zoos, and museums as conservation leaders. The Vancouver Aquarium is a founding partner of TOP. Now, ten years later the study has been repeated and expanded to include two Canadian population centres: Toronto and Vancouver.

This comprehensive survey of public perception, opinion, understanding and attitudes toward the ocean and environmental issues of Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver provides valuable insight for those interested or involved in conservation, education or policy relating to the environment in general and the ocean, climate change and global warming in particular.

Canada is a country with diverse interests, opinions, attitudes and behaviours; this study is not intended to paint a picture of the “typical Canadian”, but provides a snapshot of two major population centres. While limited in geographic scope, the findings are nonetheless robust and significant in their representation of those regions sampled. The Toronto and Vancouver study forms the basis on which the study will be expanded to other cities across Canada.

The survey, conducted by IMPACTS Research, bases its findings on data from a survey of over 22,000 adults in the United States, and Canada between August and November of 2008. The survey was conducted online, and respondents were paid, screened and certified. The sample accurately reflected the population in these metropolitan areas, and the overall confidence level in its findings is 95 percent.

## Summary

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver generally have the sense that the world’s ocean is fragile and endangered. They are worried about the health of the world’s ocean. The good news is that they know there’s a problem, they believe they can make a difference, and are willing to do something about it.

We have work to do, however. Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver may know there’s a problem and want to help, but they don’t have the basic tools required to get started. The study shows that there is a knowledge gap that may be keeping people from acting on their desire to be part of the solution. There is considerable confusion about what factors influence the health of the ocean, what role individuals and their governments have to play in finding and being a part of the solution.

The study clearly shows that organizations such as nonprofit aquariums have both a challenge and an opportunity: the challenge is filling in that knowledge gap; the opportunity is that the public cares, believes they can be a part of the solution, and wants to know how—and they believe in the ability of those organizations to deliver.

The findings point to tremendous value in expanding the study to include several other regions across Canada.

## Key findings from the Canadian data

### **We are concerned, but aren’t quite sure why.**

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver are worried about climate change and global warming, the health of the world’s ocean, and the future availability of healthy seafood—much more so than Americans. But these tend to be perceived as mostly disconnected issues: climate change and global warming are not perceived to be factors affecting the health of the ocean or availability of healthy seafood; the connection between their purchases of seafood and ocean health are not strongly recognized; and pollution, not overfishing is seen as the most important factor affecting the future availability of healthy seafood.

Implications: While pollution is an issue, overfishing and the effects of climate change, as well as increasing atmospheric CO2 are much greater threats to the availability of seafood and to ocean health in general. This confusion about the causes and effects of important environmental factors may be a barrier to recognizing our own connection to these issues—an important prerequisite to taking action.

### **But we want to help.**

While lacking important knowledge and understanding about issues that affect the ocean, Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver would be willing to change their behaviour and even pay more in a restaurant if they know it will positively impact ocean health or preserve an endangered species.

Implications: Programs and initiatives that provide entry points for engagement are an important part of the solution.

### **Whose responsibility is it, anyway?**

Canadians in these cities strongly agree that protecting the environment is the responsibility of the federal government. They also believe that, while protecting the environment *should* be a priority for the government, significantly fewer believe that protecting the environment *is* a priority for the government. However, Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver do not trust government agencies to protect the quality of our environment. They trust nonprofit organizations such as aquariums to protect the quality of our ocean to a much greater degree than they trust government. When it comes to protecting the oceans specifically, those Canadians surveyed are unsure with whom the responsibility lies.

Implications: The public should be encouraged and empowered to become engaged in issues of ocean and environmental policy and management.

### **The ocean: half full or half empty?**

While U.S. citizens are ambivalent about the future of the ocean, Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver are not very optimistic.

Implications: Pessimism can be a powerful demotivator. Conservation education organizations should strive to avoid messages of hopelessness (intentional or not) and find ways for individual citizens to become engaged in solutions.

### **It's in the numbers.**

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver do not associate human overpopulation with ocean health concerns. This suggests a perceived disconnect between overpopulation and such factors as pollution and overexploitation of ocean resources.

Implications: As the human population grows, so too does the need for inexpensive, healthy protein. The pressures on fish populations will continue to increase with human population growth. This connection should be emphasized and related management issues addressed.

### **We know we don't know.**

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver feel less informed about current environmental issues than Americans, who feel they are very informed. Canadians and Americans both only feel moderately informed about ocean health issues specifically.

Implications: The public are not lacking in information; what is missing is the ability to make sense of it all. Organizations like nonprofit aquariums can and should play a role in helping Canadians gain the basic level of ocean literacy to become active participants in the democratic system.

### **People are the problem—*other* people, that is.**

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver agree that human actions are the primary threat to ocean health and climate change, but that *their* actions, specifically, have little impact. Americans are somewhat more likely to agree with the statement, "my actions have little impact on climate change." While they believe they are not necessarily part of the problem those Canadians surveyed do believe that they can and should be a part of the solution. They don't, however, know what those actions should be.

Implications: Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver believe that the primary role of aquariums is to educate people about ocean conservation, and want aquariums to help them

understand actions they can take to protect the environment in general and the ocean specifically.

### **Listen to your children.**

Canadians in Toronto and Vancouver feel strongly that their children are better informed about current environmental issues than they are.

Implications: Perhaps it is time to toss out the phrase, "the young will inherit the Earth," and recognize that the youth of today have a role to play—today. Youth can and do influence the opinions of their parents and caregivers, and attention should be given to how we engage this important sector of the population.

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