

Understanding the Georgia Public's Perception of Water Issues and the Motivational Messages to Which They Will Respond

An overview of research conducted by Responsive Management for the Pollution Prevention Assistance Division, DNR, 11/3/03
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Purpose and Scope of Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand Georgia residents' attitudes and opinions toward water resource issues in Georgia, Georgia residents' willingness to participate in water conservation measures, incentives and constraints to water conservation in Georgia, as well as the educational messages to which the Georgia public will respond in a statewide water conservation campaign. There were three phases to the project: 1) pre-survey focus groups with Georgia residents, 2) a telephone survey of the Georgia public, and 3) post-survey focus groups with Georgia residents.

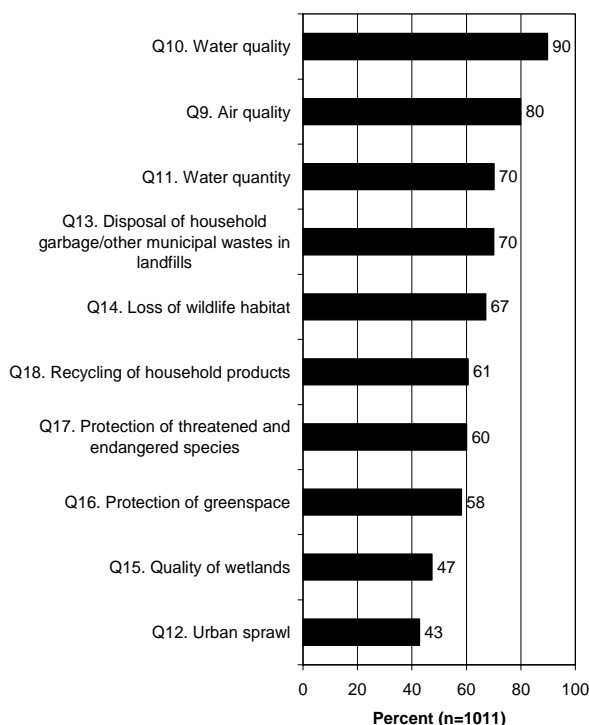
Major Findings

- Water quality and water quantity appeared to be two of the most important "top-of-mind" natural resource/environmental issues facing Georgia.
- Although both water quantity and water quality were important issues to Georgia residents, there was greater concern for water *quality* over water *quantity*.
- Georgia residents had mixed opinions on whether or not the State's waterways were healthy.
- Georgia residents were concerned about water quality and water quantity in Georgia because of the potential effects on human well-being more so than the potential effects on environmental well-being.
- Overall, the Georgia public had positive attitudes toward the general need to conserve water. Most importantly, the Georgia public strongly supported the statewide water conservation effort.
- The survey research showed that the top three ways that the Georgia public felt they consumed water were: taking a shower, doing the laundry, and washing dishes or other household items.
- The survey research demonstrated that Georgia residents are already undertaking and are likely to undertake a variety of water conservation measures.
- Statistical analyses showed that females were statistically more likely than males and African-

Americans were statistically more likely than other races to be likely to undertake certain water conservation measures.

- Statistical analyses showed that there appears to be an important geographical component regarding Georgia residents' attitudes toward water quantity and quality as well as propensity to adopt various water conservation measures.
- Not receiving feedback on whether their water conservation efforts were working was the number one reason preventing Georgia residents from adopting water conservation behaviors (long term).
- Georgia residents were most concerned about health-related effects/human well-being as an incentive to conserve water. Penalties were less likely to motivate Georgia residents to conserve water (long term).
- Brochures mailed to the respondent's home were the preferred method of receiving information about water conservation.

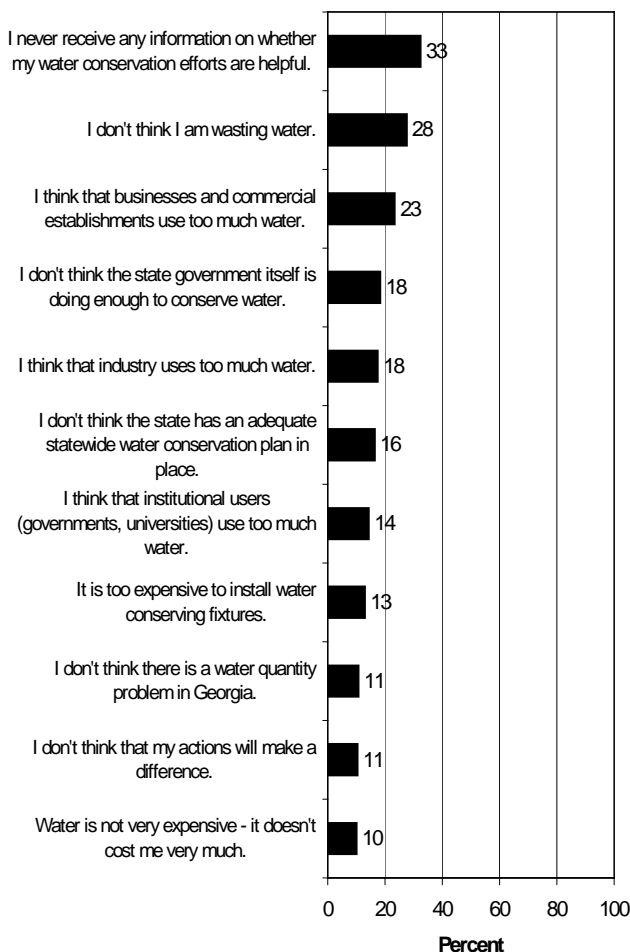
Percent who think the following issues are very important.



Implications and Recommendations

- Results from this study demonstrated that a majority of the Georgia public is concerned about water resource issues. Although both water *quantity* and water *quality* were important issues, there was greater concern for water *quality* over water *quantity*. The implication is that an effective water conservation campaign should tie water quality to water quantity in order to elevate awareness and concern about water conservation in Georgia.
- In addition to a general concern about water resource issues, the Georgia public was also concerned with specific aspects of water conservation, including following the 2000-2002 watering restrictions and conserving water even during times of adequate rainfall.
- The research suggested that Georgia residents need to be informed about household activities that consume more water than they thought were consuming.

Percent who strongly agree that the following reasons prevent them from conserving water in Georgia (top 11 answers).



Constraints To Water Conservation

- Constraint #1: ***There is a perception that the State should be doing more to conserve water.*** The research suggested that the Georgia public needs to be shown that the State is doing its part to help conserve water.
- Constraint #2: ***Residential users feel that the State does not have an overall plan for water conservation in place.*** The research suggested that many residential users were interested in learning how their water conservation efforts fit into the overall statewide effort.
- Constraint #3: ***There is no feedback mechanism concerning the effectiveness of water conservation efforts.*** Fortunately, the survey research indicated that a majority of the Georgia public believes that they can personally make a difference in terms of water conservation. However, this belief needs to be reinforced with a feedback mechanism showing people that they really are making a difference, such as providing quantified data regarding the number of gallons that have been conserved.
- Constraint #4: ***Many residential users believe that they do not consume very much water.*** Although the Georgia public acknowledged that residential users consume a substantial amount of water, there is still a need to educate Georgia residents about how significant residential water use is, as well as how individuals may waste water without fully realizing it.
- Constraint #5: ***There is a general lack of knowledge and awareness about where to find information about water conservation measures.*** The research suggested that the Georgia public is concerned about water resources in Georgia, but some residents will need more information on what they can do to conserve water.
- Constraint #6: ***People do not generally make the connection between water quantity/water conservation and water quality/human well-being.*** The research indicated that although Georgia residents would be motivated to conserve water for reasons related to human well-being, many Georgia residents are probably not clear on the link between water conservation and water quality/human well-being.
- Constraint #7: ***There is a perception that water is readily available.*** The research indicated that many Georgia residents do not really believe that there is a serious water quantity problem or that there will be an imminent water shortage.

Participation in and Motivation to Conserve Water

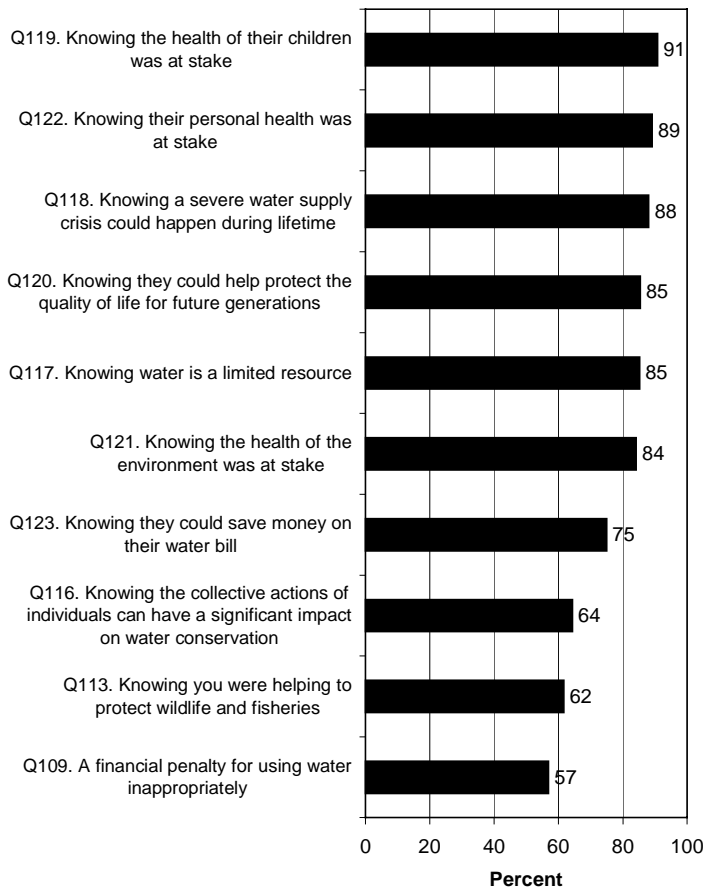
- The top water actions that Georgia residents most commonly said they had *already undertaken* were washing only full loads of clothes and dishes, not letting water run unnecessarily, watering the lawn infrequently, and washing the car less frequently or not at all.
- The survey results indicated that the Georgia public is *most likely* to: install water efficient hose nozzles for outside garden hoses, practice drought-tolerant landscaping, routinely check fixtures for leaks, and install water efficient washing machines and dishwashers.
- The water conservation measures with the highest percentages of the Georgia public having said they would be *not at all likely* to implement related to irrigation systems and toilets.

- As part of the water conservation campaign, Georgia residents that are not already participating in water conservation behaviors should be encouraged to adopt one or two small measures.
- An effective water conservation campaign will educate the Georgia public about the link between water quantity, water quality, and health issues.
- The survey research suggested that the Georgia public will be motivated to conserve water if they know how it personally affects them, especially regarding their personal well-being and the well-being of their children.

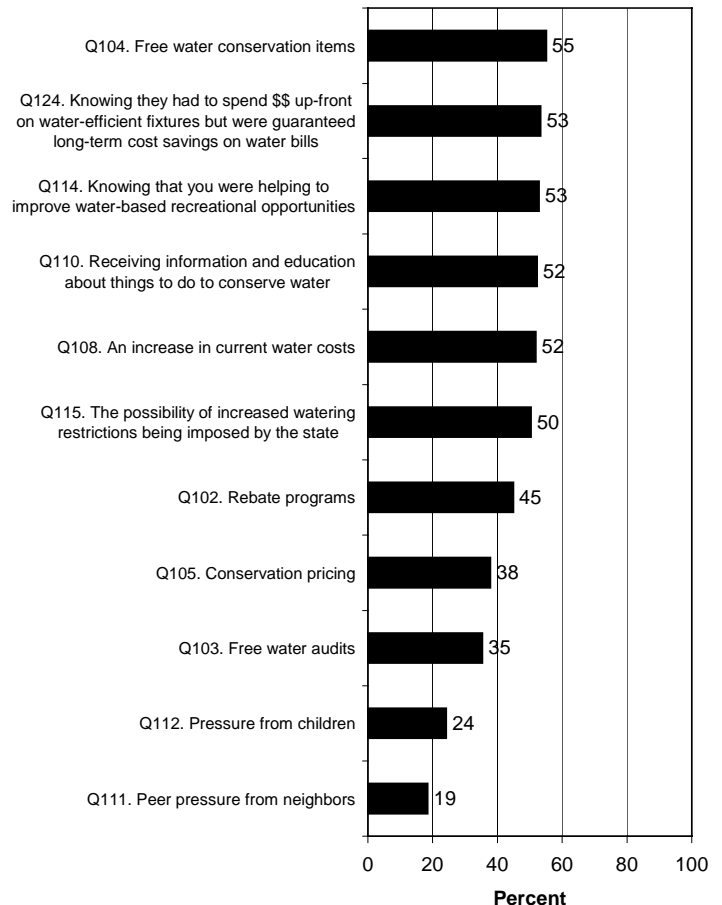
“What is the State doing to conserve water? They are using so much water but we are told to water only on certain days. If the State starts there first, people will be a lot more comfortable doing it [conserving water] at home.”

(A focus group participant)

Percent who said that the following would make them very likely to adopt water conservation practices or conserve water. Part 1.



Percent who said that the following would make them very likely to adopt water conservation practices or conserve water. Part 2.



Message and Communications Development

- Several water conservation messages were tested in the post-survey focus groups. The messages that resonated highly had several elements in common. For example, a majority of focus group participants responded positively to messages that were short and declarative, encouraging them to act. The focus group participants preferred messages instructing them to act by saving water rather than messages that were less action-oriented. Most of the focus group participants preferred the word, “save” to “conserve” because they felt that “save” implied a greater sense of urgency. Save may also be more effective because it is more closely connected to human well-being than the word conserve, which is often associated with the environment. The focus group participants felt that messages that conveyed a sense of *urgency* but not *emergency* would motivate them to conserve water. Overall, the positive messages resonated much higher than the negative messages.
- A major umbrella campaign is necessary to increase awareness and concern about water quantity and water conservation in Georgia. All water conservation information, education, and outreach efforts should be developed and coordinated so that they fall under the umbrella campaign. This is especially important for consistency and to ensure that the campaign is widely recognized in Georgia.

The research indicated that the water conservation campaign will be successful if it includes the following elements:

- A water conservation message that specifically encourages people to act by saving or conserving water.
- Promotes the links between water quantity/water conservation and human well-being.
- Provides numerous water conservation tips to the public rather than focusing on only one or two. (Note that specific water conservation efforts can and should be promoted such as lists that contain numerous water saving tips but not in the overall message of the campaign.)

In addition to these elements, the water conservation campaign must incorporate the following:

- The public needs assurance that the State is doing its part to conserve water and that other entities are also doing their part (agriculture, business, etc.).

- The public needs feedback on whether their water conservation efforts are working. This will reinforce the water conservation messages and promote long-term behavioral changes.
- Georgia residents must be educated regarding how significant residential water use can be.
- The public needs to be provided with simple, readily available information on water conservation and measures that can be taken to conserve water. The public needs to be reminded about water conservation at regular intervals.
- Encouragement needs to be provided to those individuals who are already taking water conservation measures – especially to encourage those individuals to implement a few more measures in addition to what they are already doing.
- Georgia residents that have not taken any measures to conserve water should be encouraged to adopt one small, inexpensive measure to initiate them into the water conservation process.

Successful Communications Programs

As the water conservation campaign is developed, all of the partners in this effort must keep in mind that certain challenges will develop. During the past fifteen years, Responsive Management has had the opportunity to evaluate numerous communications and outreach efforts. Based on these evaluations, Responsive Management has identified some of the challenges that may arise during implementation of communications plans. Knowing these challenges ahead of time will enable the water conservation campaign to be as effective as possible:

- Appropriate and adequate financial and personnel resources must be allocated. Many communications programs and efforts are woefully under-funded from the start.
- Target audiences need to be identified. Communications efforts sometimes attempt to be all things to all people.
- Target audience knowledge levels, opinions, and attitudes toward the specific communications or outreach topic need to be adequately researched; initiatives begin with little scientific understanding of the target audience.
- Messages need to be carefully identified and crafted. Messages should be simple and not complex.
- Appropriate media need to be selected with the specific target audience in mind.
- Efforts and initiatives must be implemented long-term.