

# The Attitudes of Young People to the Environment

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In recent years the scientific evidence supporting the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and other major environmental pollutants has increased (see for example IPCC 2001), yet Australians' stated level of concern for the condition of the natural environment has decreased. For example, while the majority of Australians (57 per cent) admit that they are worried about environmental problems, this has fallen from 75 per cent in 1992 (ABS 2004).

This paper focuses in particular on the relative lack of concern expressed by younger Australians with the need to protect the natural environment. New polling data, discussed below, shows that young Australians are among the least concerned group in Australia.

## **Young people and their concern for the environment**

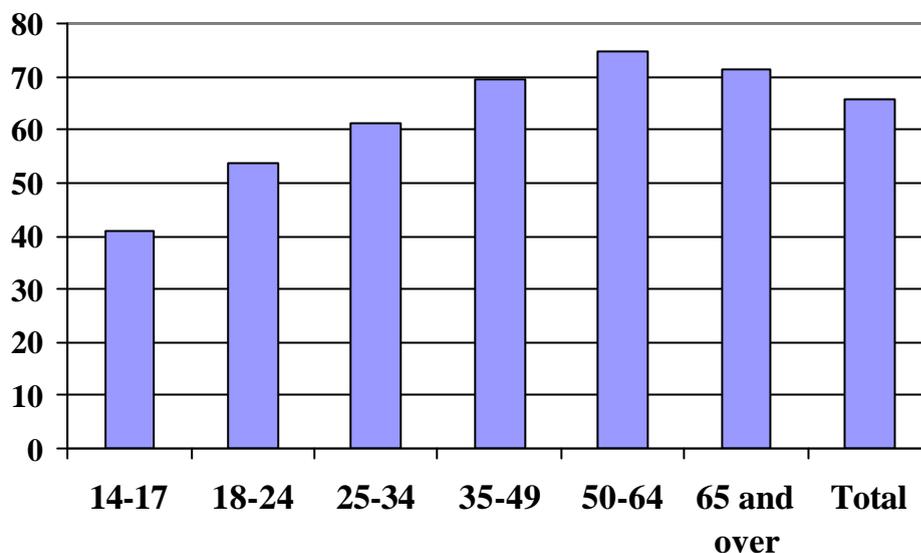
It is often suggested that the increased attention paid to the state of the natural environment in the media and school curricula is resulting in the creation of a particularly environmentally aware cohort of younger Australians. In addition to a higher degree of awareness, the fact that younger Australians will inherit the environmental degradation of today suggests that, if nothing else, self interest should encourage them to be more concerned than older generations about the need to repair the environment.

A number of studies provide some evidence to support the proposition that young Australians are concerned about the environment (Manning and Ryan 2004; Mission Australia 2004). But these papers fail to provide data on the relative level of concern for the environment among different age cohorts.

This paper draws on data collected by Roy Morgan Research from 56344 respondents aged 14 and over across Australia. The data were collected in face-to-face interviews during the period October 2003 to September 2004 and allow comparisons of the views of younger Australians with those of other age groups.

As shown in Figure 1, while over 40 per cent of 14-17 year olds identify themselves as environmentalists, this is in fact well below the national average of 66 per cent. Respondents aged 18-24 reported the second lowest level of identification with environmentalism, while those aged 50 to 64 reported the highest.

**Figure 1 Proportion of respondents who agree with the statement ‘At heart I am an environmentalist’, by age (per cent)**



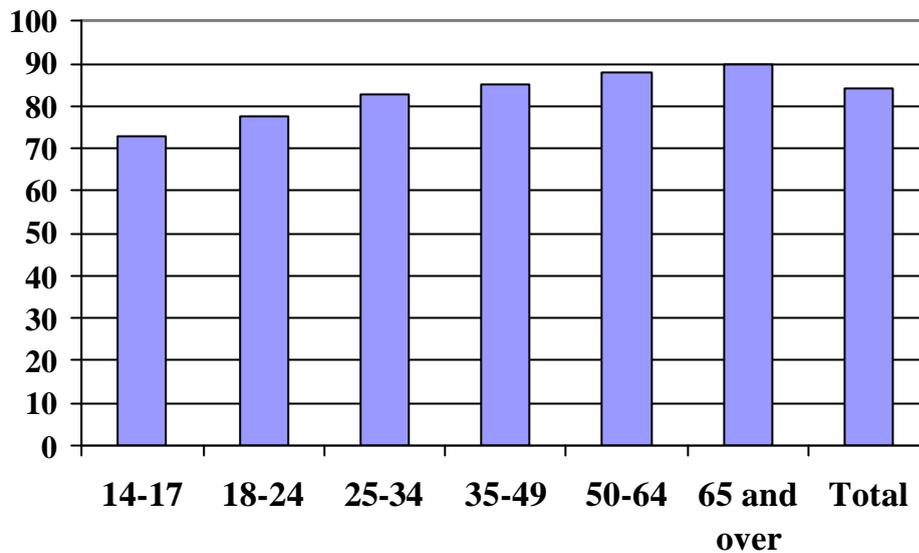
Source: Roy Morgan Research (survey of people aged 14 and over taken between October 2003 and September 2004)

The age distribution of respondents who identify themselves as ‘environmentalists at heart’ is very similar to that of respondents who agree with the statement that ‘I try to recycle everything I can’ - see Figure 2. (However, participation in recycling continues to increase among those aged over 65 whereas this age group is slightly less inclined than those aged 50-64 to identify themselves as environmentalists).

While identifying as an environmentalist and participating in recycling both increase with age, this is not the case in relation to perceptions of the need for immediate action to ameliorate environmental harm. Figure 3 shows the proportions of respondents who agree with the statement ‘if we don’t act now we’ll never control our environmental problems’. An overwhelming 88 per cent of respondents agreed with this statement, but 14 to 24 year olds were less likely to agree than all other age groups except those aged over 65. This is consistent with a survey that found 79 per cent of Australians agree that Australia has ‘a long way to go’ in protecting the environment (Hawker Britton 2004).

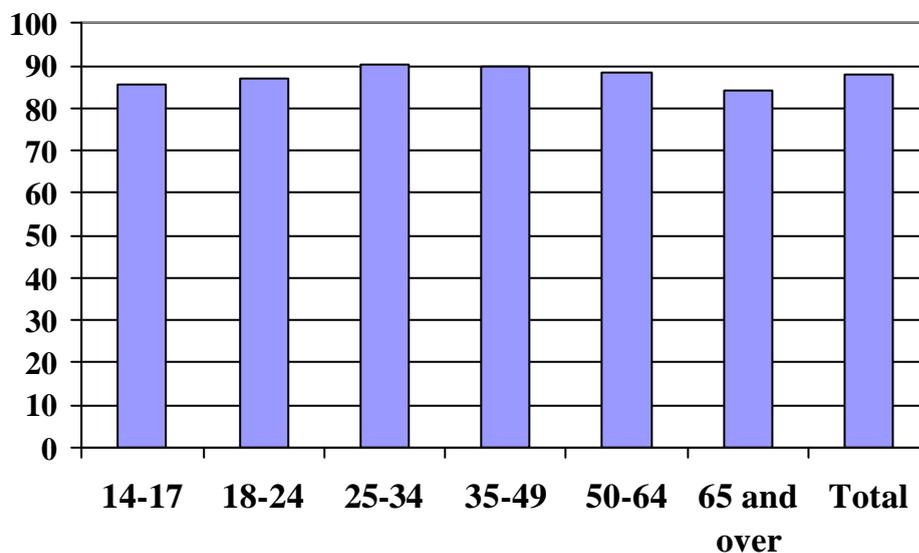
While a high proportion of Australians believe that urgent action is required in order to address pressing environmental problems (Figure 3), there are substantial differences between age groups. Both the youngest and the oldest age groups are less likely than average to see the need for urgent, while those aged 25 to 50 are more likely than average to do so. The data presented in Figure 4 provide a possible explanation for this.

**Figure 2 Proportion of respondents who agree with the statement ‘I try to recycle everything I can’, by age (per cent)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research (survey of people aged 14 and over taken between October 2003 and September 2004)

**Figure 3 Proportion of respondents who agree with the statement ‘If we don't act now we'll never control our environmental problems’, by age (per cent)**

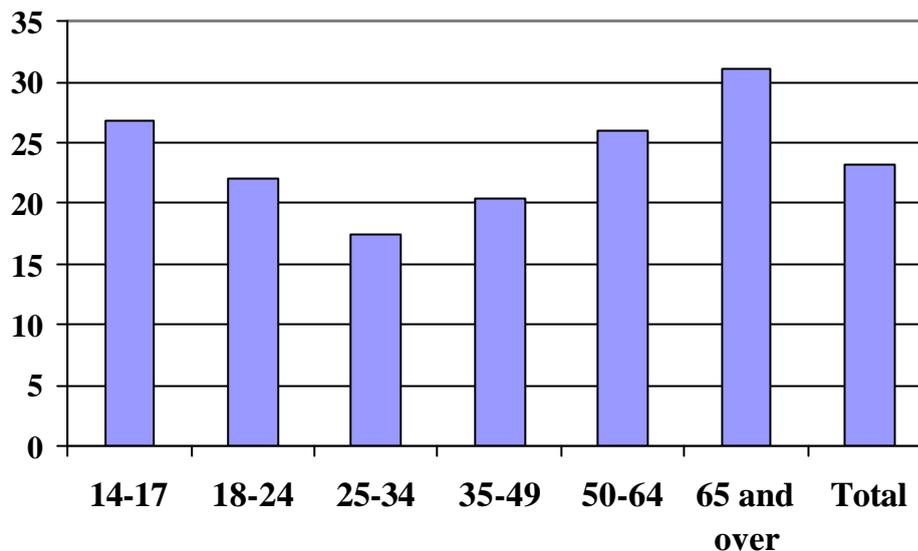


Source: Roy Morgan Research (survey of people aged 14 and over taken between October 2003 and September 2004)

Figure 4 shows that the age groups least likely to agree that immediate action is needed to address environmental concerns are also the most likely to agree with the claim that ‘threats to the environment are exaggerated’. Similarly, while those aged 25 to 34 are the most likely to support immediate action in regard to environmental problems, they are the least likely to agree that concerns about the environmental are exaggerated.

While awareness of the need to protect the natural environment is high, there appears to be an important link between the belief that claims about the extent of environmental problems are over-stated and support for immediate action to address environmental problems. Scepticism about the extent of the costs associated with global warming, such as the views often expressed by the Federal Government, are therefore likely to have an impact on the perceptions of today's youth.

**Figure 4 Proportion of respondents who agree with the statement 'Threats to the environment are exaggerated', by age (per cent)**



Source: Roy Morgan Research (survey of people aged 14 and over taken between October 2003 and September 2004)

## Conclusions

The majority of Australians consider themselves to be 'environmentalists at heart'. This belief ranges from a low of 41 per cent among 14-17 year olds to a high of 75 per cent among 60 to 64 year olds. There is little evidence to support any claim that environmentalism is particularly attractive to younger Australians.

Suggesting that actions speak louder than words, a higher proportion of Australians are active participants in voluntary recycling schemes than consider themselves environmentalists. Notably, the numbers relating to identification as an environmentalist and participation in recycling are quite similar, with both increasing strongly with age.

While older Australians are much more likely than younger Australians to identify as environmentalists and participate in recycling, when it comes to fear about the state of the environment and the need to act immediately to protect it, there is a high degree of similarity between the views of the youngest and oldest age groups. Those aged between 25 and 50 are the most likely to believe that urgent action is needed and least likely to believe that concerns about the environment are exaggerated.

Despite the increase in both scientific and political attention paid to environmental problems and a heightened emphasis on the environment in school curricula, young

Australians are among the least likely to see themselves as environmentalists, to participate in recycling and to believe that urgent action is needed to protect the environment. They are, however, among the most likely to believe that threats to the environment are exaggerated. Recent research by The Australia Institute showed that young Australians are also more likely than average to spend money on things they never used, as well as being less likely than average to feel guilty about doing so (Hamilton *et al.* 2005).

It may be that concern about the environment takes time to develop in individuals, in which case many Australians aged 14 to 24 who are currently little concerned with the need to protect the natural environment may change their views. Alternatively, it may also be the case that nine years of Federal Government policy and rhetoric, in which environmental concerns have been considered of secondary importance, are changing the views of Australia's youth.

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## References

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