



research
NEW ZEALAND

**Special Report:
The general public's views on "Sustainability"**

November 2007



Foreword

Research New Zealand's findings are another piece in the jigsaw to help us understand – and drive - New Zealand's shift to greater sustainability.

The findings underscore the priority that New Zealanders place on sustainability. They show that 83% of New Zealanders see sustainability as important and that 28% of New Zealanders follow the sustainability conversation closely.

Such findings have direct relevance for the public sector. They give further mandate to develop policies that embed considerations for the environment into the core of public policy. For New Zealand to become the first truly sustainable nation, we need to take sustainability to the core of how we live, do business and enjoy our leisure.

The benefits will ripple far beyond our environment. Sustainability offers Kiwi businesses access to rapidly growing new 'green' markets, greater efficiency and smarter risk management. Sustainability offers us, as Kiwis, improvements in our quality of life and savings on household fuel and electricity bills, while protecting the rivers, coasts and landscapes that we cherish.

The Ministry for the Environment is working with international organisations, central and local government agencies, businesses and community partners to realise these benefits of sustainability.

One of our priorities is addressing the Research New Zealand finding that only one in four New Zealanders feel they are in a good position to make an impact. The Household Sustainability Programme will make it easier for Kiwis to have an impact by providing information and assistance on sustainable actions such as changing to energy efficient light bulbs or installing low-flow showerheads across the five themes of energy, building, transport, water and waste. Such actions are critical; there is no silver bullet for environmental challenges such as climate change. Meaningful action means many people take many steps.



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Summary

In July 2007, a Research New Zealand-Clemenger BBDO poll examined the New Zealand public's attitudes towards sustainability. The aim of the research was to benchmark New Zealanders' current awareness, knowledge and attitudes towards sustainability, to inform the debate on sustainability and related initiatives.

This report details the following key trends emerging from the survey

- ◆ **Awareness of the sustainability issue:** About one-half of New Zealanders appear to have sustainability on their radar, but only one in four New Zealanders admit to following the conversation closely. These people have a well-defined demographic profile.
- ◆ **Understanding of the sustainability issue:** Many New Zealanders struggle to define what the sustainability conversation is about. Many others have a narrow and shallow understanding. There is only limited appreciation that the question of New Zealand's sustainability goes beyond the environment and climate, to the economy and society in general.
- ◆ **Agreement with the principle of sustainability:** Most New Zealanders (83%) agree or strongly agree with the principle underpinning the sustainability issue (i.e. that countries should make decisions about the present, with the long-term future in mind). However, less than one-half (41%) believe it is *urgent* that New Zealand become sustainable.
- ◆ **Action on sustainability:** Government and local councils are identified as being in the best position to make an impact on New Zealand's sustainability, with only one in four New Zealanders identifying individuals as being in a good position to make an impact. .

Background

A Cabinet paper, prepared by the Minister for Economic Development in 2000¹, defines sustainable development as "meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"². It goes on to describe social, environmental and economic sustainability issues:

¹ Anderton, J. (2000). *Sustainable development*. Wellington: Ministry of Economic Development. Retrieved 13 September, 2007, from <http://www.med.govt.nz/>

²This definition is attributed to the "Brundtland Commission". The definition was used for the first time in 1987, in a report to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

United Nations. (1987). Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (General Assembly Resolution 42/187, 11 December 1987). Retrieved October 26, 2007, from <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/42/ares42-187.htm>



- ◆ Socially sustainable relationships are strong and enduring. They are resilient in the face of conflict between individuals and groups. They adapt to changing social and economic conditions. They are open to all who wish to participate in, or belong to, them. Social sustainability is about ensuring that as far as possible, all individuals are given the opportunity to participate and belong to their local communities as well as the wider society in which they live. In other words sustainability requires an absence of social exclusion and the provision of opportunities for work and involvement in the community.
- ◆ Economic sustainability means an economic process that continues into the long-term. It consists of economic growth that is not interrupted by rising inflation, growing unemployment, emerging balance of payments imbalances and increases in inequalities in the distribution of income or wealth. Economic sustainability is about ensuring we are not only concerned with the quantity of economic growth but also its quality.
- ◆ Environmental sustainability means that development providing for human needs does not impair the quantity or quality of non-renewable resources or the health of ecosystems and, at the same time, creates renewable resources to replace non-renewables. Environmental sustainability is about maintaining and enhancing the capacity of our natural resources to supply environmental goods and services for people and nature.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment noted in 2002, that sustainability is not something that a government department, local authority, or other public agency can have sole responsibility for. Organisations, businesses, communities, and individuals must take responsibility for the resources they use, the energy they consume, the waste they produce, and their impacts on biodiversity³.

In order to assess New Zealanders' current awareness, knowledge and attitudes towards sustainability, Research New Zealand conducted a telephone survey of New Zealanders in July 2007.

Methodology

The telephone survey, conducted from 18 to 25 July 2007, involved interviews of a nationally representative sample of 501 New Zealanders aged 15 years and over. The maximum margin of error for this survey was $\pm 4.6\%$ at the 95% confidence interval. The data was weighted to ensure it was an accurate representation of New Zealand's general population. The poll was not taken on behalf of any organisation, but as part of Research New Zealand's monthly survey of attitudes and opinions.

³ Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment. (2002). *Creating our future: Sustainable development for New Zealand*. Wellington: Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment. Retrieved 13 September, 2007, from http://www.pce.govt.nz/reports/allreports/1_877274_03_8.shtml



The questions asked in this survey are detailed in the appendix.

Key Findings

Awareness of the sustainability issue

Half (49%) of those surveyed were aware of recent conversation involving the word 'sustainability'. However, only 28% of respondents said that they followed the issue closely.

Those that did follow the issue closely had a well-defined demographic profile and were more likely to:

- ◆ be male (56% compared with 44% female)
- ◆ be aged 60 years or older (26% aged 60+ years compared with 17% of 15 – 29 year olds)
- ◆ have a University qualification (40% compared with 24% with a secondary school qualification).

The majority (72%) of respondents said that they not follow the conversation on sustainability closely. These respondents were significantly more likely to be female, aged under 29 years, with a high school qualification.

The media was the most common source of information about sustainability, with 75% of respondents mentioning television as a source of information and 58% mentioning newspapers. Other sources mentioned included radio (21%), workmates, friends and family (21%), and the Internet (17%).

Interestingly, those who follow the sustainability conversation closely are more likely to use 'active' sources (e.g. the internet and books). Those who do not follow the sustainability conversation closely, are more likely to rely on 'passive' sources (e.g. the TV news).

Understanding of the sustainability issue

Just one-quarter (25%) of respondents could give a clear and accurate description of what sustainability is. At the other extreme, one-quarter (26%) could not give a description at all.

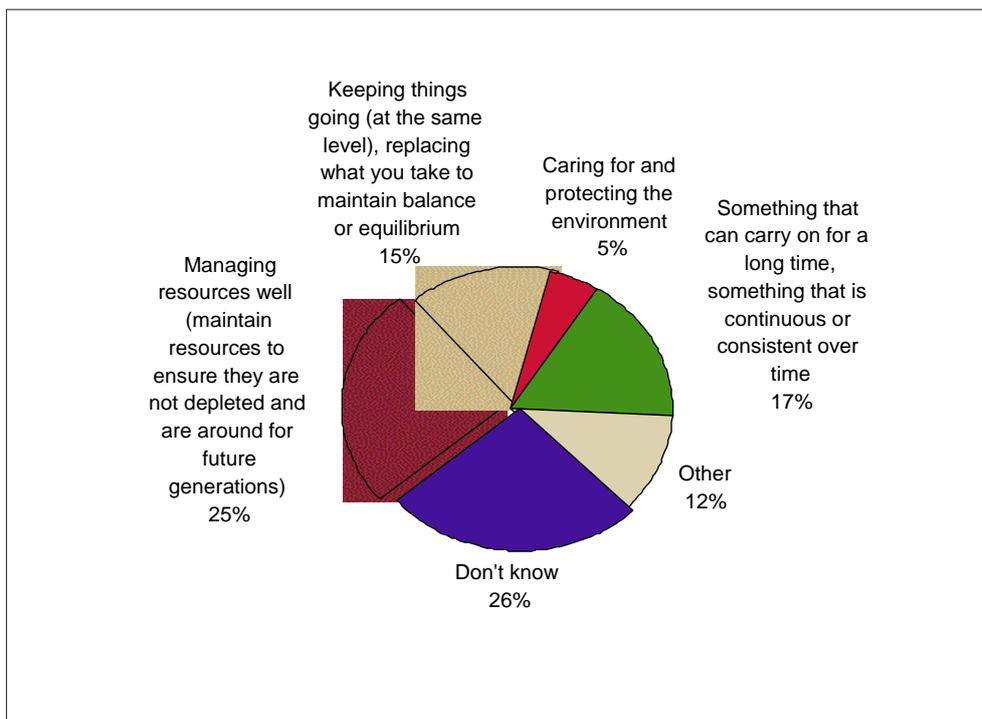
Those giving a clear and accurate description were significantly more likely to:

- ◆ be male (31% compared with 21% females)
- ◆ be middle-aged (31% aged 30-39 years compared with 19% aged 60+ years)



- ◆ have a University qualification (36% compared with 11% with no formal education and 18% with a secondary school qualification).

Figure 1 Respondent descriptions of what sustainability means



Examples of clear and accurate descriptions include:

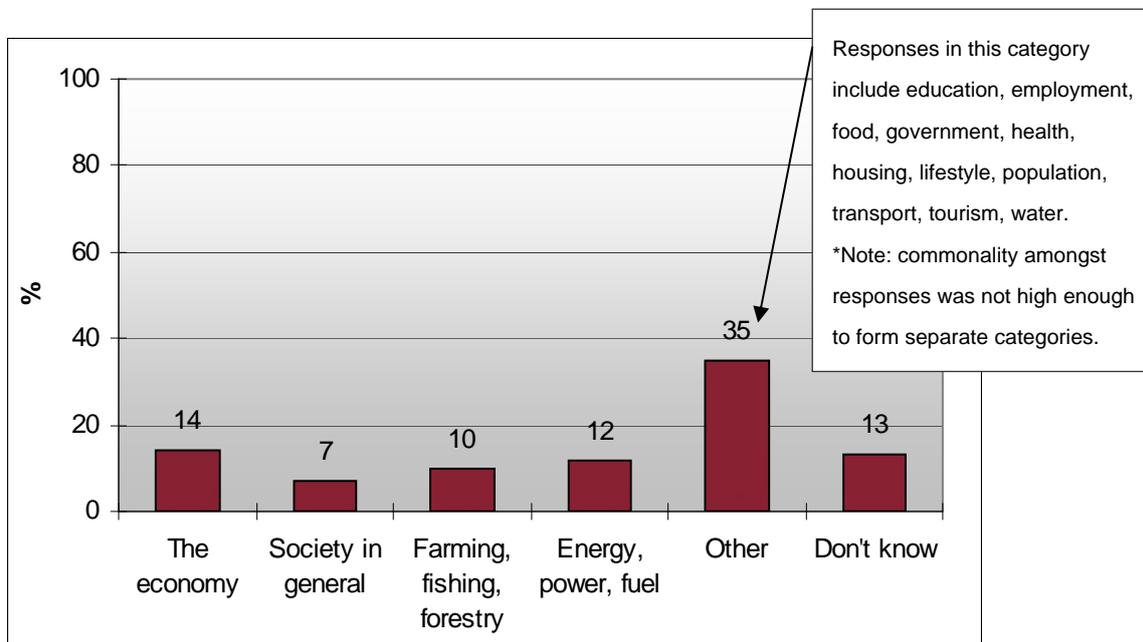
- ◆ “Ensuring that the resources are there not for just now but for future generations as well”
- ◆ “Is about making sure that there is something left for our future generations - sustaining and maintaining”
- ◆ “It means managing today's resources so they could be used for future generations”

What areas are associated with sustainability?

In addition to the environment and climate, respondents associated ‘sustainability’ with a range of areas, but in a limited way. Not surprisingly, those that followed the sustainability conversation closely, were more likely to associate it with a wider range of areas. And, after prompting, most agreed that the term sustainability is associated with ‘the economy’ and ‘society in general’.



Figure 2 Other areas (excluding the environment and climate) that respondents associate with the term 'sustainability'



Agreement with the principle of sustainability

Most respondents agreed with the principle that countries should be making decisions on a 'sustainable basis' (83% either agreed strongly or agreed)⁴. Furthermore, most also believed that countries should be considering the future 'a lot' when making these decisions.

However, although most respondents believed that sustainability is important (83%), just half (49%) believed that it is very urgent that New Zealand do something about becoming 'environmentally sustainable', and less than half believed that it is very urgent that New Zealand do something about becoming 'economically sustainable' (41%) or socially sustainable (31%).

In all cases, the degree of perceived urgency was heightened amongst those that follow the sustainability conversation closely.

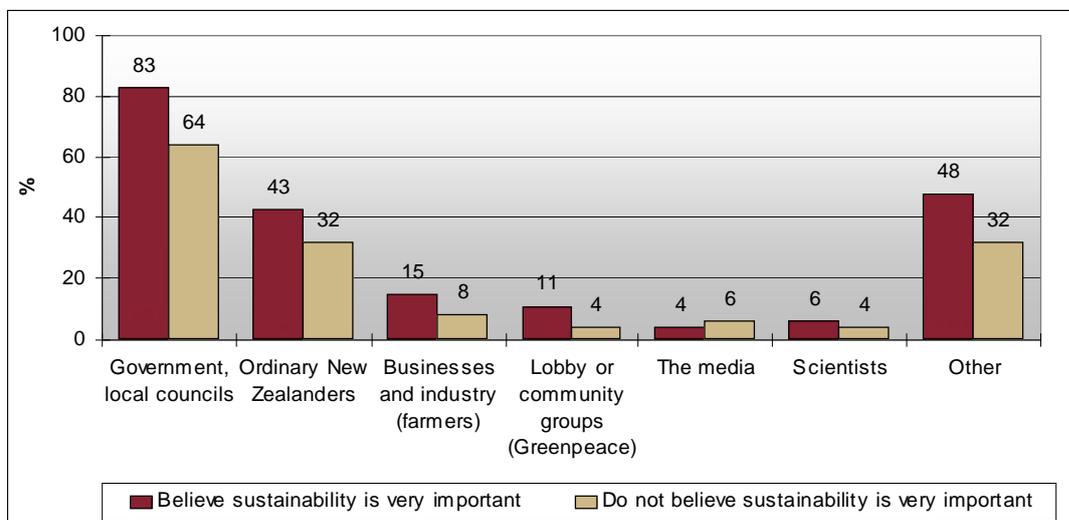
Action on sustainability

Most respondents (72%) believed that government or local councils are in the best position to influence sustainability. Fewer (37%) felt that ordinary New Zealanders had influence. Interestingly, even most of those who consider sustainability to be very important did not believe they could directly influence New Zealand's sustainability.

⁴ As defined in the survey as 'decisions about the present, but with the very long term future in mind'.



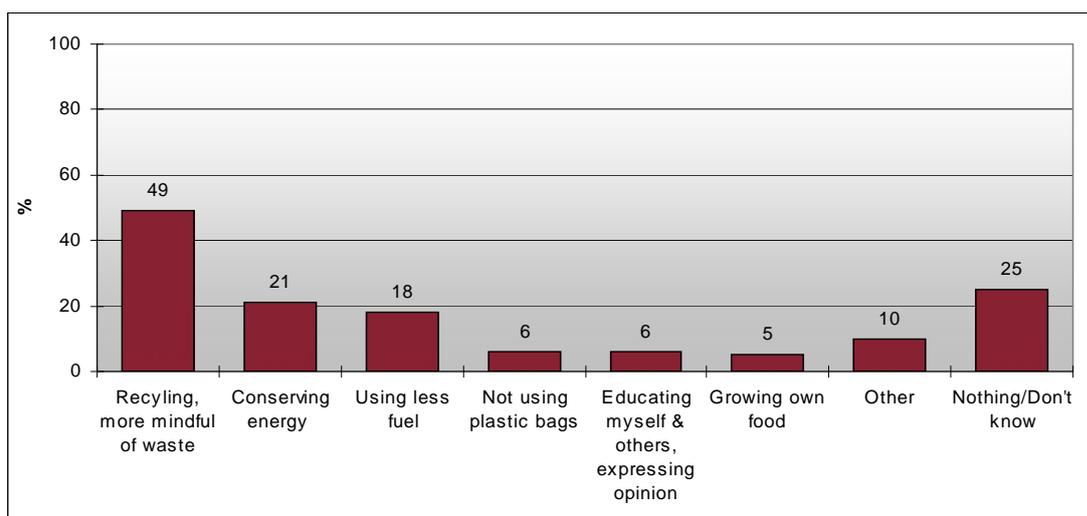
Figure 3 Perceived avenues of influence over sustainability (by perceived importance of sustainability)



However, in an apparent contradiction, once prompted, most respondents agreed that 'ordinary New Zealanders' *can* influence the sustainability of New Zealand and, of those, nearly all agreed that 'ordinary New Zealanders' included themselves.

Many are doing something to help New Zealand become more sustainable. This effort is mainly focused on recycling and being more mindful of waste and conserving energy. Not surprisingly, those following the sustainability conversation are more likely to have done something.

Figure 4 Behaviours undertaken to help New Zealand become more sustainable





Conclusions

Sustainability may be the new buzz word in government and business circles, but this survey indicates that it has yet to catch on with the wider public.

Among the findings of the survey are that:

- ◆ about one-half of New Zealanders appear to have sustainability on their radar, while the other half do not
- ◆ many struggle to define what the sustainability conversation is all about
- ◆ there is only limited appreciation that the question of New Zealand's sustainability relates to the economy and society as well as to the environment and the climate
- ◆ while most New Zealanders agree with the principle on which the sustainability issue is based, only one in four admit to following the conversation closely, and these people have a well-defined demographic profile
- ◆ less than one-half of New Zealanders believe it is urgent that New Zealand become sustainable
- ◆ government and local councils are identified as being in the best position to make an impact on New Zealand's sustainability, while only one in four respondents identify ordinary New Zealanders as being in a good position to do so
- ◆ one in four New Zealanders admit to having done nothing.



Appendix A: Sustainability Questions for the Omnibus (31 May 2007)

1. Television, radio and the daily newspapers often contain news items that use the word, “Sustainability”? Have you heard or read any news items recently that use this word?

2. If you had to explain what this word meant to someone who didn’t know, what would you say?
PROBE CLEAR ANSWER

3. *READ TO ALL:* The word, “sustainability”, is often used to refer to countries making important decisions now, with the very long-term future in mind, as well as current conditions.

With this definition in mind, do you agree or disagree that countries should think about the long-term future when making decisions about the present? Would you say they should think about the future a lot, somewhat or just a little?

4. The word, “sustainability” is often used in discussions about the environment and climate. That is, there is currently a belief that unless the world does something to restrict carbon emissions, the environment in which we live will be affected.

Would you say you’ve been following this discussion very closely, somewhat closely, or not at all?

5. And other than the discussion about climate and the environment, what other areas if any do you also associate with the term “sustainability”?

PROMPT: What about the “economy”?, and “society in general”?

6. Thinking about this topic in terms of New Zealand. How urgent do you believe it is for New Zealand to do something about ... becoming “environmentally sustainable”?, “economically sustainable”?, and “socially sustainable”?

FOR EACH, ASK: Would you say that it is very urgent, somewhat urgent, or not at all urgent?

7. Where or from whom would you say you’re getting most of your information about “sustainability”? *CODE FIRST MENTIONED, OTHERS MENTIONED*

8. Who or what do you believe is in the best position to influence the “sustainability” of New Zealand? *CODE FIRST MENTIONED, OTHERS MENTIONED*

9. And what about ordinary New Zealanders, in their every day life and work?



10. *Does this include you as well?*

11. *What if any steps can you say you've taken in the last year to help New Zealand become more "sustainable"?*

12. *Demographic questions.*