

# Research Brief 4

## Environmental Perceptions, Values and Actions

From the ESRC's New Opportunities Research Programme on  
**ENVIRONMENT AND HUMAN BEHAVIOUR (EHB)**

environment and  
human behaviour  
esrc new opportunities programme



## INTRODUCTION

'The environment' does not mean the same thing to different groups of people. The meaning ascribed to this word may be different, or multiple, depending on peoples' situations and perceptions, and especially when they come from widely differing backgrounds, classes or cultures. Three projects in the EHB Programme explored very different contexts for environmental values, perceptions and actions.

- For the Tuareg in Africa, the environment, conceived as their cultural heritage, is their principal asset for the future. It is therefore to be safeguarded and those who degrade or seek to remove aspects of it are to be resisted.
- For much of the Indian middle classes, the environment has traditionally been perceived as either irrelevant to, or in conflict with, their desire for economic development. Natural resources are to be used to support industrialisation, and the relatively affluent can insulate themselves against any negative environmental impacts, which this may bring about. While this is still the case, there are indications of growing anxiety about some environmental issues, notably air pollution.
- For UK low-income communities, the environment means both the local living environment and the idea of the wider global environment and environmental problems. Local environmental issues, which include the state of streets and the behaviour of others, have a strong effect on people's quality of life. Local environmental conditions have a significant effect on an area and can be key to local neighbourhood success or decline.

The three studies underline the fact that the relationship between environment and human behaviour is complex and varies considerably depending on the context. Detailed understanding of environmental meanings, attitudes and behaviours for different people is essential to any attempts to try and influence human behaviour towards the environment. These three examples alone show how widely different contexts and environmental attitudes lead to very different policy requirements.

## THE MAIN RESULTS

For the indigenous people of the Sahara-Sahel region, the environment itself is not perceived solely as a physical entity, but also as a socio-cultural entity. This is frequently not understood by external agencies, including government and many 'aid' and tourism-associated agencies, something that is likely to be the source of many disputes and conflicts. The research from this project recorded the increasing concern a small but growing number of the indigenous population of the C. Sahara (Tuareg) have been expressing over the last few years, that tourism, in its present form, is likely to lead to an environmental catastrophe (especially to their cultural heritage). This concern spilled over into overt conflict actually while the research project was taking place.

The research on the Indian middle classes underlined the importance of disaggregating country-level research into environmental perceptions, values and behaviours by class (amongst other things), and undermining simplistic North-South binaries in understanding environmental beliefs, values and behaviours. It pointed to the value of ethnographic approaches, given the peculiar complexity and multi-dimensionality of 'environmental' issues, especially in relation to analyses of values, perceptions, beliefs and behaviours. As one of the first studies on this theme, the project has played an important role in stimulating an important emerging research area.

For low-income communities in the UK, the research found that while local environmental problems are more pressing, there are still high levels of awareness and concern about global environmental issues, at least among those who are active in the community. Levels of awareness, concern and knowledge of these issues do not appear to vary as much between people from different income levels as is often supposed. Moreover, many of the interviewed residents in low-income areas readily identified ways in which global environmental problems impact on their everyday lives, were aware of desirable actions to help address environmental problems generally, felt a sense of individual responsibility and were keen to do their bit. Individual action is however often constrained by wider factors, such as access to recycling schemes, affordability of organic food and the behaviour of others. Different actions, such as recycling or cutting down on car use, are often fundamentally different in nature with different motivations and barriers. Efforts to support more environmental action need to be tailored to the action in question and the people taking action.

## Indigenous Peoples, Environmental Change and Tourism in Extreme Environments

The reason for choosing the Tuareg peoples of the Sahara for this research project was because their problems are similar to those faced by indigenous peoples in other extreme environments. In most cases these peoples are marginalized from mainstream political, social and economic developments; have minimal access to transport and communications systems, and have reduced or limited access to state amenities such as healthcare, education, labour markets, etc. In short, their continued existence, lifestyles, cultural heritage and future development are threatened on many fronts.

Such societies have four features in common, the behavioural implications of which were the subject of this research:

1. In spite of their very different environments, most of these societies have experienced fairly extreme and 'unusual' climatic variability in recent years. Whether such phenomena are part of either short or long-term climatic change, and how people are responding to it, is something that this project set out to assess.
2. Nearly all these societies and their environments are the recipients of tourism, sometimes on an overwhelming scale, raising problems associated with the management of their two major resources: pastoralism and their cultural heritage, (in this case the region's prehistoric rock-art).
3. They are all subject to the UN's Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
4. In these societies, the environment

is perceived not simply as a physical entity, but as a cultural entity that is inextricably linked, often in the most complex ways, with the social order.

The project examined the actions and strategies of Tuareg 'environmentalists' in their increasingly 'political' struggle against the pressure for mass tourism and 'tourisme sauvage', especially as it was being encouraged by government agencies, which they perceived as leading inexorably to environmental catastrophe. After three months of the project (March 2003), the 'environmentalists' appeared to be well on their way to winning their case. Not only did it appear that government agencies had acceded to most of their core demands, but the UNDP announced that it was allocating \$22 million to a biodiversity programme for the region. The stated aims of the UNDP project appeared to be broadly in line with the 'environmentalists' demands. What began as concern at the damage being done to their environment by the forms of tourism that the government was encouraging was followed by a sense of incredulity that the UNDP should give such an enormous sum to the development of biodiversity in the region. It was assumed that the remaining nine months of this research project would focus on how this apparent success might be translated into political policy and action at the national, regional and local levels.

The apparent success of the 'environmentalists' was short-lived. The abduction of 32 European tourists in March 2003, allegedly by Islamic

militants ('terrorists'), not only put any further moves to develop more sustainable forms of tourism on hold, but also led to a growing perception amongst local people that the hostage crisis had been organised by government agencies who were deliberately trying to create a 'terrorist situation' in the Sahara, for the purpose of obtaining US financial support. There is now a growing belief amongst some of the more knowledgeable people in the region that the UNDP funds are being diverted by government agencies away from their intended use.

The case study highlights what is happening in many of the world's more politically marginalized regions where local people become concerned by the degradation of their environment by external agencies. Attempts to introduce better governance, better resource management and more sustainable development policies tend to run counter to these external interests which are usually allied to state and/or other exercisers of power. The study illustrates how the environment, in its wider social-cultural meaning, is at the core of many conflicts, especially in regions, which cover approximately 15% of the globe's land surface, that are at or beyond the margins of the state. The project also enhances the empirical and theoretical understanding of key issues in the debates on post-colonialism, sustainable development, tourism, globalisation, marginalisation-exclusion, indigenous rights, weak/failed states and, most especially, the 'new imperialism'.

## Middle Class Environmental Values in India: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue

In the western context, class has been a central theme within analyses of environment and environmentalism over the last thirty years. The ways in which environmental experiences, values, perceptions and behaviours have been mediated and are differentiated through different class positionalities has been the subject of a range of approaches, from the political (e.g. environmental justice debates) to the socio-psychological (e.g. post-materialist arguments), and in the exploration of specific issues

(e.g. attitudes to waste and recycling). In the non-western context, however, class-based analyses have tended to focus overwhelmingly on the relationship between poverty and environmental change, with little attention to the environmental values, beliefs and behaviours of other class groups.

This project therefore brought together a range of scholars and activists to discuss the environmental values, beliefs and behaviours of a particularly

dynamic, growing and prominent middle class group in the South, namely within India (and, indeed, beyond it, though its diasporic connections and flows). Over the last decade or so, economic liberalisation and globalisation has resulted in an explosion of the 'new middle classes' in India, who, depending on definition, now number somewhere between 50 and 300 million people. Both those who celebrate and those who critique the values and behaviours of this fast-growing group, point to the rate

and nature of their consumption (of luxury goods, travel, energy, media, leisure and so on) as their defining characteristic. The environmental implications of consumption rates within this group extends far beyond India's borders, and will have global consequences. Although absolutely and relatively small in relation to India's vast population of the poor, the high-consuming middle classes are larger than the population of most European countries. To take just one example, the fastest growing category of car in 2004 in India is the largest, 'luxury' set of models (including SUVs), and the potential market for future growth is simply enormous. Moreover, India's middle classes dominate the legal, educational, administrative, media and corporate spheres. Their environmental concerns, beliefs and priorities are already having a profound effect on the shape of public debate and policy formulation on

environmental issues. Of particular – and worrying – note are the indications that middle class 'environmental' concerns, demands and activism tend to be anti-poor, authoritarian, and little engaged with issues of consumption.

The project established an interdisciplinary dialogue, primarily through a workshop held in August 2003, but also in ongoing conversations and interactions since then. Contributors were invited to provide theoretical models, case studies, methodological interventions and policy-related suggestions. It rapidly became apparent that the subject was even more original and under-researched than had been thought, and in fact the main result of the project has been to act as a stimulus to what is an emerging research field. The key areas that arose all have significant implications for environmental policy-making, and for environmental and

social justice within India. They include debates over the value of western models of environmental values, beliefs and behaviours in India (including post-materialism, information-based models, risk models, green consumerism and ecological modernisation). In each case, an analysis of the specific history, political economy and culture of India's middle classes suggests profound differences with the western-based experience. At the same time, there is plenty of evidence to suggest both significant variation (by gender, region, generation etc) within the middle classes, and that public debate over environmental issues is changing very rapidly. The main conclusion that emerged from the workshop is that the debates initiated there will be of critical importance in projecting India's environmental future, and its local, national and global consequences.

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## Environmental Issues and Human Behaviour in Low-Income Areas of the UK

LSE Housing looked at the links between environmental issues and human behaviour in UK low-income areas. The research carried out an overview of existing evidence and ran focus groups with residents, primarily those who were active in their communities, in low-income areas.

The environment is a term that covers a wide range of meanings for people in these communities, from the streets, parks and communities in which they live, to the wider issues of global warming, rainforests and pollution. Local living environments have a significant impact on most people's quality of life, and occupy a high priority on their list of concerns. This can be especially true when local environmental problems are especially bad as they often are in low-income areas.

Despite the importance of local environmental issues, there are also high levels of awareness and concern about global environmental issues among those interviewed by this project. The focus groups revealed that not only were many of the residents aware of and concerned about global environmental issues, but they had a good understanding of the issues and could identify a range of ways in which

they impacted on their everyday lives. Many of the groups' members attributed a significant level of responsibility for environmental problems to individual people, and many were keen to contribute to addressing local and global environmental problems. However, they also discussed the constraints that the wider context placed on taking individual action. For example, it can be hard to reduce consumption when living in a consumerist society, and if others around you are not helping then your individual efforts can seem pointless.

Studies of environmental action reveal a complex picture with wide variation in the levels of action taking place. Some actions such as recycling and energy saving are common, while others like buying organic food are much less so. Different people also take different actions, with energy saving being more common among people living on lower incomes, and recycling being more common for more affluent people. Other actions, such as cutting down on car use, show no difference among different income groups. A similarly complex picture emerges in relation to motivations for and barriers to action.

These findings suggest a range of lessons for efforts to support behaviour change. For example:

- some explanations for lack of action, such as lack of knowledge of solutions, and difficulty in connecting global problems to everyday lives, may need rethinking
- efforts to encourage and support different environmental actions need to be specifically tailored depending on the action in question and the audience. Different environmental actions can be very different in nature, with different motivation and barriers, and different people may act for different reasons and face different barriers
- developing a context that supports individual action and makes it count is essential. Individuals' action has a key role in addressing environmental problems, but is little use if the actions of government, business or wider society are acting to make them worse. Another key challenge is to find a way of getting a critical number of people to act. This makes individual action much easier and more meaningful.

## AVENUES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The research on the Tuareg was, in a sense, 'hi-jacked' by the intervention of the political events outlined above. While these highlighted the roles of both 'environmentalism' and 'tourism' (livelihoods) in the unfolding process of political struggle and identity, it has also raised a major research priority in the form of the security threat now posed by the US's militarisation of the region and its almost inevitable 'blowback'. This area more broadly is likely to be an important focus of research in the quest for understanding about wider relationships between environment and environmental change, security and geopolitics.

In the Indian context the pressing requirement is now for detailed empirical investigation and testing of the ideas advanced by the project, both

in India and beyond (notably China, of course). This would help develop a far greater understanding of environmental policy processes and directions, given the strong intersection and influence of the middle classes. The Asian middle classes are unlikely to simply 'mimic' their western counterparts in their growing concerns over, understandings of, and responses to environmental issues and changes. Rather, more context-based understandings and analyses need to be developed, which, without neglecting the understandable interest in poverty and the poor, also factor in the roles and impacts of wealthier and influential social groups.

In the UK there needs to be more research into the environmental concerns and attitudes of different types of people, and into the different

motivators and barriers for different people in relation to different environmental actions. Lessons from previous successes, and experiments with different approaches, should also be used to give insights into how a critical mass can be persuaded to change their behaviour. If there really is widespread public environmental concern, and if some traditional explanations (for example, people not seeing the connection between global problems and their everyday lives) for why action lags behind seem less valid than previously thought, then research should explore both what is stopping people taking more environmental action and, if people are in fact willing to act, how the transition from concern to action can be supported.

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