

Dirty Money - A Research Report on Australian Consumer Attitudes to Global Warming and Environmental Policy, Commissioned by Neco Holdings, Melbourne, NECO Holdings, 2009, 25 pp. (accessed at <http://www.neco.com.au/dirtymoney> [August 11, 2010])

Neco is an eco superstore in Melbourne. It received feedback about caring for the environment from customers and marketing focus groups (people who had purchased or considered purchasing various Neco environmental products). This feedback prompted Neco to commission an on-line survey of opinion about various environmental concerns. This report is a summary of 1721 survey responses (77% from NSW and Victoria; 8% from Queensland), from “customers and non-customers of Neco” and stated to be a broad cross section of society (p. 4). Commentary on responses was informed by focus group input.

Brief introductory comments (3 pp.), using information and quotations from press releases, suggest direct links between, for example, dust storms in Melbourne and climate change, and that governments have been inactive or inefficient in taking action to suppress global warming. An overview of the political context in Australia in 2009 follows, making reference to blockage of the Emission Trading Scheme (ETS) in the Senate and related matters. The “science” (really a set of predictions) of climate change is “listed” together with passing reference to conflicting arguments from sceptics. An executive summary (2 pp.) presents a “ten point consumer charter” based on survey and focus group responses; graphs and commentary on the survey items (15 pp.) complete the report.

Findings from this project add little to what is readily available about adult views on this topic (see below). Responses to Likert style items, albeit with focus group input, are used to over-generalise conclusions: for example because 98 percent agreed with the statement “Regardless of the cause of global warming, it is unacceptable to continue to pollute the world” it was suggested that consumers had “a uniform grasp of the challenge” (p. 8). The innuendo was that the “challenge” was primarily climate change, although the term “pollution” was often used; six of the ten-point charter referred to global warming (GW) issues.

Responses indicated about 90% agreed that GW is a major threat, caused by humankind, and were concerned about the future of the environment and their children’s future. Similar numbers thought the media focussed on “environmental politics not the environment”, “all governments complicate the real issues based on their political agenda” and “are more concerned about big business than the environment” and are not doing enough “to create new jobs in sustainable industries”. Political commentary accompanied these findings (e.g., the media not referring to the environmental benefits of insulation; the replacement of political leaders over the ETS). Interestingly two thirds of respondents thought activists were ineffective as they were too extreme.

Some items focussed on carbon trading. A majority considered this process would not be beneficial for a sustainable future and were not “happy” for their carbon credits to be “acquired by carbon producers as offsets”; a third did not understand how carbon credits worked. Focus groups voiced anger at the concept of a “carbon currency” and how it would operate (e.g., leverage of “carbon benefits”), and this led to the report’s title “Dirty Money”. Reference was made to only a fifth supporting “the Solar Multiplier” – more detail was required to appreciate this item.

This report concluded that consumers were “committed to personal change” and wanted to take their own actions (as others, e.g., governments, media were not), mainly to create a better world for their children, for whom parents (90% of sample)

were willing to make sacrifices. Most rated reducing energy consumption as the main immediate priority closely followed by recycling and water conservation, consistent with them being most concerned (from six options) about water shortages but least with GW (consumers, though, were “very concerned” about all options).

Overall there is a simplicity about this report. Its conclusion was that a “schism” exists “between ordinary people prepared to act and leaders playing political games” (p. 25). The document unashamedly supports the latter position while accepting that people will take action and hence ameliorate the world’s “pollution”. Readers need to appreciate that expressing concern often does not lead to taking action and if consumers are to take actions consistent with their concerns then often this is dependent upon governmental regulation, societal infrastructure, inconvenience and cost (Gardner & Stern, 2002). Ways forward are not as simple as “ordinary people prepared to act” (e.g., by installing insulation and solar panels)- government decisions are also required to further facilitate actions by consumers and other sectors including industry, with the latter responsible for at least half of all transport and stationary energy emissions (i.e., electricity etc.) (NSW DECCW, 2005).

For environmental educators this report adds little to what is already known about Australian adult views concerning the environment, except for its ETS input. For more detailed and useful analyses related to attitudes towards “pollution” in general and GW in particular, see *Who Cares about the Environment in 2009?* (DECCW NSW, 2010) and *Who Cares about Water and Climate Change in 2007?* (DECC NSW, 2007) and for views about various ETS options see Carson, Louviere, and Wei (2009).

There were errors (e.g., incorrectly summated percentages (p. 16), omission of “not” (p. 15)) and, in places, inadequate information as well as use of colours in some graphs (pp. 20-22) that were difficult to interpret.

References

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Reviewer Biography

Keith Skamp is an Adjunct Professor in the School of Education at Southern Cross University. He has been a lecturer in undergraduate and graduate units in science education, environmental education and research methodology for many years and has led and been involved in numerous professional and curriculum development initiatives in these areas at state, national and international levels. Keith’s research and consultancy in science and environmental education has resulted in several book chapters and numerous refereed journal publications as well as reports to State and

Federal governments; currently his research focuses on students' responses to global warming. Keith has held visiting scholar and professorial positions at Columbia, Durham, Liverpool, Leeds, British Columbia, Lethbridge, and Flinders universities and received distinguished awards for university teaching and service to professional science education associations.