

Attitudes Towards the Environment: Informing and Reforming Environmental Policy

John Proops

School of Politics, International Relations and the Environment,

Keele University, UK

Introduction

In contrast to this usual science-economics-based approach to environmental policy, this paper argues for the need for understanding environmental attitudes as a basic element in the process of formulating environmental policies. I begin by outlining the need for understanding environmental attitudes. Problems and methods for researching into environmental attitudes are then discussed; in particular, the relatively new technique of Q methodology is offered as a powerful tool. The paper concludes by arguing for treating the understanding of environmental attitudes to as a necessary first step in environmental policy, not as a final add-on.

The Need to Understand Environmental Attitudes

Environmental policy is presently driven by natural science and economics. The natural science diagnoses environmental problems (e.g. acid rain, ozone layer depletion) and offers a range of solutions. Economics analyses the solutions on offer and, using cost-benefit analysis, establishes the most economically 'efficient' actions to take. Indeed, environmental policy analysis has been seen as being in three stages:

- Identify the problem (e.g., ozone layer depletion, global warming).
- Use theoretical analyses to find potentially effective responses to these problems (e.g., banning the use of CFCs, the introduction of carbon taxes).
- Implement these policies.

Natural science is useful for stage 1 and economics for stage 2; however, stage 3 has had relatively little treatment in the literature. In particular, the issue of what makes environmental policies socially and politically acceptable has been surprisingly little explored.

It is apparent that a vital issue in environmental policy is the identification of how individuals 'think about' environmental problems. I regard this as of central importance, because until we know the 'discourses' people use about the environment, it will be very hard to judge what, and whether, environmental policies will be socially acceptable, and therefore capable of being implemented.

Fortunately, in recent years it has started to be recognised that understanding the public and their environmental attitudes is vital. There are two important issues here.

- The public are affected by environmental damage and often notices it before the scientists.
- The public must alter their behaviour and activities as part of the solution to environmental problems.

Both involve the public's perception of the environment; i.e. their environmental attitudes.

Problems of Attitudinal Research

Exploring people's attitudes is notoriously difficult, and faces several problems of research methodology and implementation. These problems can be put into four categories.

1. Clarity of Attitudes

It is not necessarily the case that people find it easy to specify their attitudes, even to themselves. Putting attitudes into clear and precise words seems to be even more difficult.

2. Consistency of Attitudes

People's attitudes may be, to an extent, internally contradictory (e.g. simultaneously opposing abortion, because of a belief in the sanctity of human life, but supporting capital punishment).

3. Statistical Significance of Attitudes

Statistical analysis of data can give confidence that findings have some significance and validity. However, qualitative data on attitudes is often not amenable to statistical methods.

4. Minimising Investigator Influence on Attitudes

If investigators into attitudes do not take care, the attitudes they reveal in their study may, at least in part, be imposed by them. For example, if an investigator tries to elicit attitudes by asking questions, these questions may guide the answers given.

In the next section we shall examine various approaches to attitudinal research, and see how they deal with the above problems.

Approaches to Attitudinal Research

One can identify three distinct approaches to attitudinal analysis, one quantitative, one qualitative, and Q methodology.

1. Qualitative: Interviews and Focus Groups

This approach involves the investigators having a 'conversation' with people whose attitudes are being investigated. The investigators try to establish a rapport with the individual or group, and by careful guidance of the conversation, to elicit responses that can be interpreted as revealing attitudes. This is a very popular method of social research, but it has the drawback of requiring very skilled investigators, who can be sufficiently part of the conversation to cause it to generate useful results, but simultaneously sufficiently 'outside' the conversation not to cause it to be unrepresentative of the other participants' views and attitudes. This approach tries to allow for lack of clarity and consistency of expressed attitudes, through careful interpretation by the investigators.

A problem of this qualitative approach is that, while it can generate a great deal of useful information, in the form of recorded and transcribed discussions, this data is not easily amenable to statistical analysis.

2. Quantitative: Questionnaire-Based Studies

Another approach to attitudinal analysis is to use questionnaire-based surveys. For these, the investigator produces a list of statements which seek to elicit responses, which can be analysed statistically.

For example, a statement might be:

I think there is too little regulation of waste emissions (Tick appropriate box)

Agree	Neutral	Disagree

Such surveys have their uses, and are relatively cheap and quick methods of generating data which can be statistically analysed. However, a weakness is that they do not really explore the attitudes people hold. Rather, they examine how people respond to particular statements, so they may impose clarity and some consistency of attitudes, where this does not exist.

A further problem with surveys is that the statements used may not relate to attitudes that people would wish to express. For example, a survey study of attitudes to the provision of public parks may have a questionnaire with statements on, e.g., types of parks, park facilities, etc. However, it might be that, for many people, attitudes to public parks largely depend on issues of privacy and the preservation of 'personal space'. If there is not particular mention of this issue in the questionnaire, this important issue cannot be reflected in the study's data.

3. Q Methodology

Q methodology is a (rather successful) attempt to span the divide between qualitative and quantitative approaches to attitudinal research. As part of its method, it involves open, semi-structured interviews, as in focus groups. However, it also generates data which can be statistically analysed. Q methodology has two distinctive characteristics. These are:

- It concerns social discourses; i.e. the patterns of views and attitudes held by a certain groups of people.
- It uses the statistical technique of factor analysis to determine the range of discourses held by that group.

Q methodology addresses all four categories of problem mentioned above. Clarity and consistency of attitudes are not imposed, but are, to an extent, included in the approach, by allowing any individual to share in several simultaneous discourses. Rigorous statistical analysis of the study data is possible, indeed required. Finally, the way statements are generated, and the way participants respond to them, seeks to minimise the influence of the investigators on the attitudes revealed.

Environmental Attitudes and Environmental Policy

As mentioned earlier, current environmental policy is poor in taking into account the public's environmental attitudes. Where notice of attitudes is included, it tends to be as a last stage of policy analysis, once the science and economics have identified the 'problem' and its 'solution'.

I would argue this is exactly the reverse of what should be the case. Environmental attitudes should be the first thing to explore, not the last, for the following reasons.

- Enquiring into the public's perceptions and attitudes to environmental issues may reveal local and 'informal' knowledge, and help in identifying environmental problems which have not been noticed by formal scientific study.
- For local environmental problems (e.g. water quality, local air pollution), deciding on which should be tackled first will be as much about the public's perception of these problems as about their 'scientific' and 'economic' consequences.
- For wider or less immediately obvious environmental problems (e.g. ozone layer depletion, global warming), government policy is much more likely to be effective if it works with public perceptions and opinion, rather than against it. Where public attitudes are not conducive to necessary environmental policy, this can indicate where public education and/or the use of economic incentives is needed.