Science for Environment Policy
DG Environment News Alert Service
European Commission

08 June, 2006

Behavioural Attitudes to Water Saving

British researchers have recently analysed the different behavioural attitudes towards water saving in households in the United Kingdom. The authors have identified four different types of individuals according to their behavioural characteristics. They conclude that it is necessary to recognise behavioural complexity in order to ensure that policies and initiatives for water conservation are effective.

Freshwater is a limited resource and its appropriate management is therefore critical if we are to guarantee the long term sustainability of the supply. Water required for drinking and other domestic purposes makes up a significant proportion of the total demand. Excessive use, including by households, of water in areas with over-abstraction can result in serious environmental problems such as low river flows, water shortages, salinisation of freshwater bodies in coastal areas, human health problems, loss of wetlands, desertification and reduced food production. In response to the increasing water demand from households, governments and water companies have increasingly focused their efforts on water saving in the home. Activities such as turning off the tap when cleaning teeth or waiting until the washing machine has a full load before using it are some of the recommendations that, if respected, can lead to considerable water savings. In order to ensure that water conservation efforts are effective, policy makers need to be able to define population groups who are both active and less enthusiastic with regard to water saving so they can better target water saving initiatives.

Recently, British researchers examined the social, attitudinal and behavioural composition of water saving activities using a sample of 1600 households from Devon, in the United Kingdom. The main goal of this research was to examine the links between water saving, energy conservation, green consumerism and waste management in and around the home. The authors used a 14-page questionnaire that asked a series of questions about "environmental habits" and that included a frequency scale.

The major findings of this researcher were:

- Behavioural complexity: Environmental action should be conceived in holistic terms. Focus should be placed on whether an activity is based on consumption or habit.
- Behavioural grouping: The study identified at least four types of individuals based on environmental behaviour and commitment (committed environmentalist, mainstream environmentalist, occasional environmentalist, and non-environmentalist). Accordingly, these different attitudes should be taken into account when promoting policies. There are also differences between individual actions and actual groups that should be noted.
- Life styles types: Analysis of the socio-demographic data and the reported attitudes provides further evidence that social situation and attitudes play a very important role in determining behavioural commitment.

Overall, the study highlights the need to recognise behavioural complexity, with a wide variation of activities and lifestyle choices. Therefore, policies and initiatives targeting water saving should take into account the lifestyles of those they are trying to influence.

The results provided by this study could assist policy makers in developing new strategies for water saving alongside promoting other types of environmentally-beneficial behaviour.

Source: Andrew Gilg and Stewart Barr (2006) "Behavioural attitudes towards water saving?", Evidence from a study of environmental actions", Ecological Economics 57(3):400-414

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Theme(s): Water, sustainable development and policy assessment

Additional Information: A recent project in the Netherlands (LIFE02 ENV/NL/000120) co-funded by the EU LIFE programme demonstrated sustainable integral water management in a communal water system in which ground water and surface water are supplemented by collecting run-off and surplus drainage water. Households participated actively in the project by disconnecting their private surface run-off from the sewers and connecting it to a new run-off collector. The project reached high rates of cooperation (95%) and also influenced inhabitants living outside the project area who offered to join the new system at their own cost