

**PUBLIC OPINION ABOUT
ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY
IN GASTON COUNTY**

(Executive Summary and Survey Results)

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INTRODUCTION

As part of their ongoing efforts, the Gaston Quality of Natural Resources Commission (QNRC) wanted to again evaluate citizens' awareness and attitudes about environmental quality issues in Gaston County. To this end, telephone interviews were conducted with a sample of 417 Gaston County citizens during August of 1995. This year's survey included many of the same questions that were asked of 514 citizens in 1990. A smaller number of interviews were completed in 1995 because less money was available. In both years the samples are reasonably representative of the Gaston County population (Table 1). However, respondents to the 1995 survey are more likely to be male, older, and have higher incomes. For both surveys, phone numbers were generated at random and interviews were conducted by professional interviewers at North Carolina State University.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Awareness of air and water pollution is down somewhat in 1995 from the high levels noted in 1990. In 1990, 50 percent of respondents had read or heard a lot about the subject, compared to 31 percent in 1995. However, two-thirds of the 1995 respondents had still heard or read "a lot" or "some" about air and water quality. (*Figure 1*)
- Respondents in 1995 had received less information about air and water pollution than respondents reported in 1990. The mass media in particular had provided significantly less information on the topic. Government agencies were the only source from which citizens had received more information in 1995 than in 1990. (*Figures 2a and 2b*)
- Awareness of the Gaston Quality of Natural Resources Commission (QNRC) rose between 1990 and 1995. Respondents continue to view their work as important. In fact, about two-thirds of those who had heard of the QNRC felt they had been effective in increasing awareness of pollution, as well as actually protecting the environment. (*Figures 3, 4, and 5*)
- Compared to other issues facing the county, citizens report less concern about air and water pollution in 1995 than they did in 1990. Gaston County citizens are most concerned about crime, drugs, education, and health care. Traffic is the only issue that is of less concern than pollution. Concerns over the various risks to public health and the environment have also fallen. However, over three-quarters still disagree that "Everyone is making too much fuss about the environment." (*Figures 6, 7, and 8*)

- Concerns over several potential impacts of pollution are still evident among Gaston County citizens. Almost half agreed that “pollution problems are reducing land values in Gaston County.” Nearly as many agreed that “pollution problems are making Gaston County a less desirable place to live.” The changes are not statistically significant. *(Figures 9 and 10)*
- Air and water pollution are still seen as problems, but are not considered as serious as in 1990. Water pollution is considered more serious than air pollution. In 1990, 43 percent of all respondents thought water pollution was a serious problem, but only 26 percent felt that way in 1995. Those viewing air pollution as a serious problem dropped from 21 to 13 percent. *(Figures 11 and 12)*
- Support for most policy approaches to controlling air and water pollution remains strong, although some drop in support is apparent. Over 80 percent continue to support all the management options (except for county wide zoning and reformulated gasoline). Support is highest for educational programs, monitoring, enforcement, and regulations. Support was quite high (93 percent) for a drinking water protection option added this year -- “an ordinance that, although costing more, requires that new businesses and industries design their facilities in such a way as to protect drinking water supplies.” *(Figure 13)*
- A new issue examined in 1995 involved household hazardous wastes (HHW), such as drain cleaners, paints, and pesticides. Awareness of environmental impacts of such wastes was fairly low (with just over one third having heard about possible problems.) However, support was almost unanimous for an annual HHW collection event. In fact, over three quarters of the households would pay \$5.00 per year to have a site open once a week for collection of HHW products. *(Figures 14 and 15)*
- Gaston County citizens still express considerable willingness to pay for improving and protecting air and water quality. Using 1990 dollars, the average Gaston County household in 1995 would be willing to pay just over \$76.00 per year (which compares to a willingness to pay of \$107.00 per year in 1990). This still translates into an overall level of support within Gaston County of nearly \$5,000,000. The majority still feel this money should be spent on water quality efforts, rather than air quality. *(Figures 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21)*
- Citizens are even more likely to recognize the economic tradeoffs associated with environmental protection. The percent who agreed that “most people are willing to accept higher costs to improve air and water quality” fell from 46 to 37 percent. Also, the percent who agreed that environmental “improvements must be made regardless of cost” fell from 72 to 60 percent. However, respondents continue to be nearly unanimous in their agreement that “we should clean up the environment for the sake of future generations.” *(Figures 22, 23, and 24)*

- In general, respondents in 1995 do not see as much need for increased government involvement in controlling air and water pollution as was noted in 1990. In all cases, the percent who feel that government is doing "too little" to control air and water pollution from various sources has declined significantly. However, very few felt there was "too much" government involvement in controlling pollution. Many thought the level of government involvement was "about right." The vast majority continue to believe that citizens have too little influence over government decisions related to the environment. (*Figures 25, 26, and 27*)
- About three-quarters of 1995 respondents have a lot or some interest in learning more about environmental issues. In fact, only 10 percent said they had no interest in such information. People tend to be more interested in information about water pollution than information about air pollution. (*Figures 28 and 29*)
- Trust in various sources of information remains high, but is lower in 1995 than in 1990. Citizens seem to have lost some confidence in scientific experts, the media, and the federal government. Trust levels remained constant for many groups, including state and county government. (*Figures 30a and 30b*)
- In 1995, respondents that reported higher levels of awareness about the environment included those who were: younger; had higher levels of education; were more concerned about pollution risks; and saw pollution as a more serious problem in Gaston County. Citizens reporting greater support for environmental protection programs included women and those with greater trust in information sources. Greater concern for risks and perception of pollution as a more serious problems also was positively related to stronger support.

CONCLUSIONS:

Gaston County citizens continue to support environmental protection and appear willing to pay for environmental programs; but that support has tended to decline during the last five years. Awareness of and concern for pollution are still quite high, but not as strong as five years ago. It appears that other issues have become even more important. This likely reflects the fact that there has not been a visible environmental crisis, which has been reflected in a decline in media coverage of the environment. This also could reflect a belief that progress has been made in protecting the environment. Ongoing efforts at education will be important given lower levels of awareness, but high levels of interest in environmental issues expressed in this survey. The QNRC has been serving a useful role in the eyes of Gaston County citizens. They also represent an innovative model for the rest of the state.

Table 1. Respondent's personal characteristics.

<u>Gender</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>Household Income</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>1995</u>
Male	49%	57%	Under \$5,000	2%	1%
Female	51%	43%	5001 to 10,000	8%	3%
			10,001 to 20,000	16%	15%
			20,001 to 30,000	22%	20%
<u>Race</u>			30,001 to 40,000	17%	16%
White	91%	87%	40,001 to 50,000	12%	12%
Black	9%	13%	50,001 to 60,000	6%	7%
			60,001 to 80,000	5%	8%
<u>Age</u>			Over 80,000	1%	8%
Under 30	18%	16%	No answer	11%	10%
30-39	24%	15%			
40-49	20%	19%	<u>Location of Residence</u>		
50-59	16%	22%	Rural Area	45%	42%
60-69	13%	20%	Gastonia	35%	32%
70 and over	10%	8%	Other Town	20%	26%
<u>Education</u>			<u>Reported Political Activity</u>		
Less than Eight Years	10%	6%	Voted for Local Official	61%	58%
8th through 11th	19%	19%	Voted on Referendum	50%	48%
High School Grad	30%	30%	Contacted Elected Official	28%	25%
Some College	25%	24%	Worked for Candidate	12%	12%
Bachelor's Degree	10%	14%			
Graduate Work	6%	7%			

Fig 1. How Much Respondents had Heard or Read about Air and Water Pollution

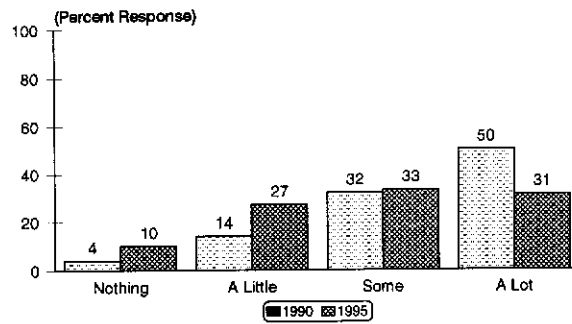


Fig 2a. Sources of Information About Air and Water Quality

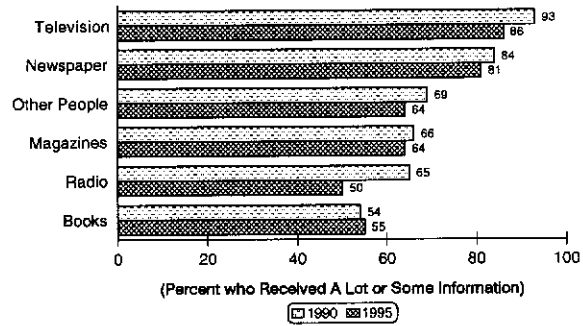


Fig 2b. Sources of Information About Air and Water Quality (Continued)

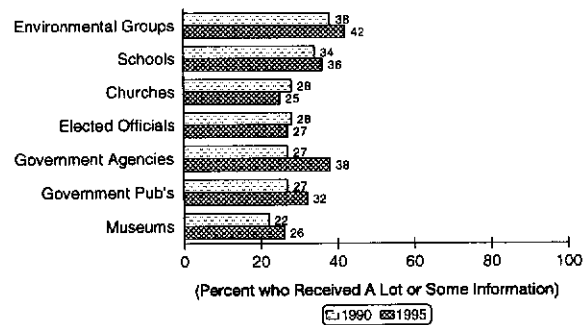


Fig 3. Respondents who had Heard About Gaston QNRC

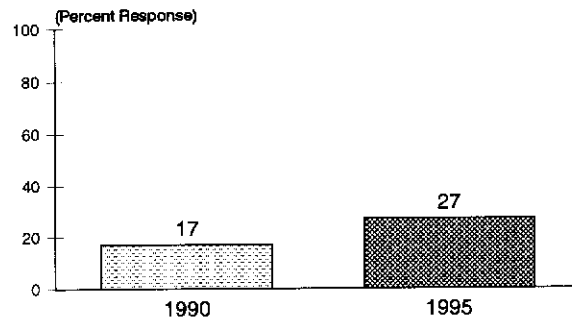


Fig 4. Perceived Importance of Gaston QNRC
(Only asked of those who had heard of QNRC)

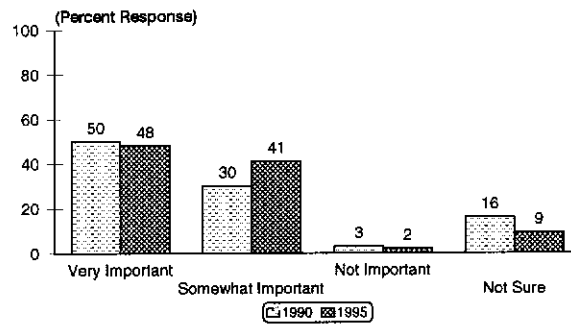


Fig 5. Perceived Impacts of Gaston QNRC
(Only asked of those who had heard of QNRC)

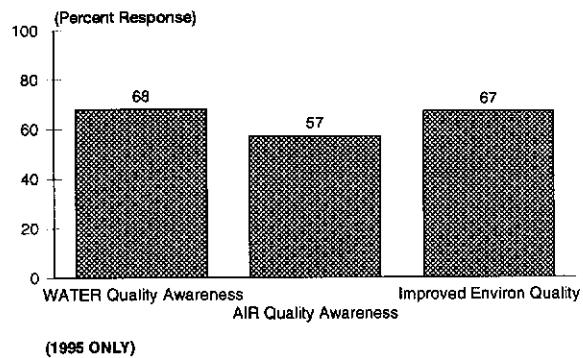


Fig 6. Respondents With More Concern for Issues Other than Air and Water Pollution

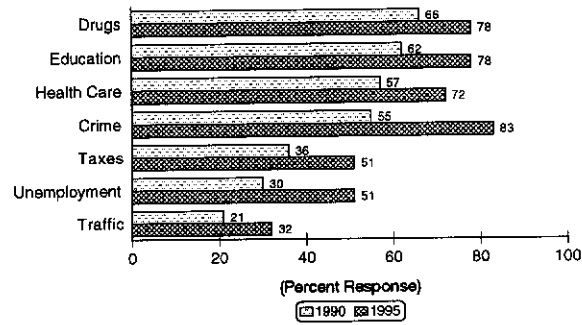


Fig 7. Concern Over Risks to Public Health and Environment

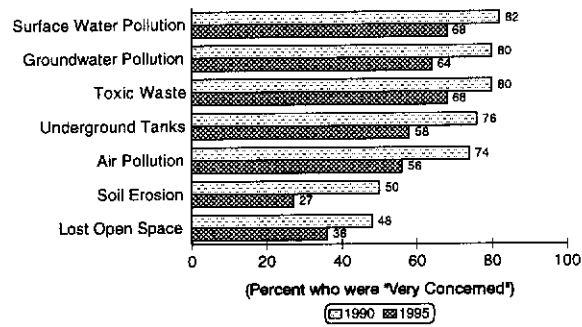


Fig 8. "Everybody is making too much fuss about the environment."

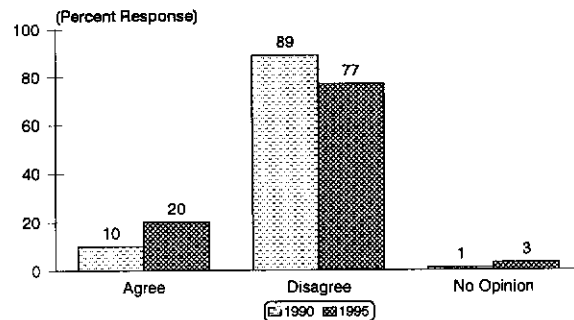


Fig 9. "Pollution problems are reducing land values in Gaston County."

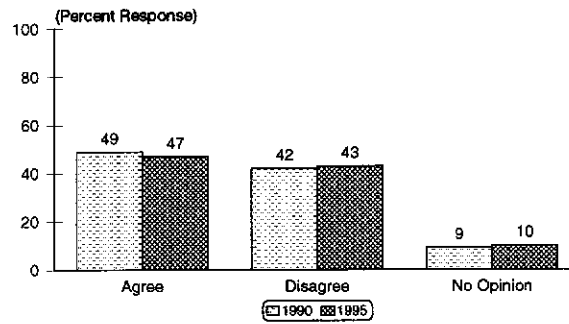


Fig 10. "Pollution problems are making Gaston County a less desirable place to live."

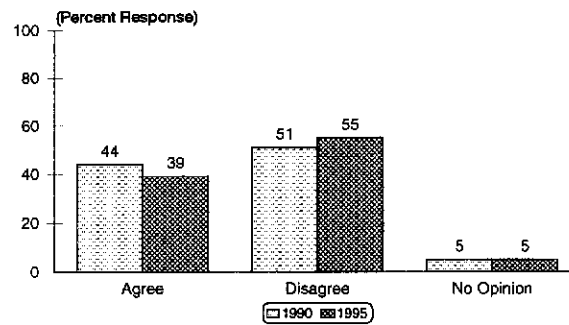


Fig 11. Perceived Severity of WATER Pollution Problems in Gaston County

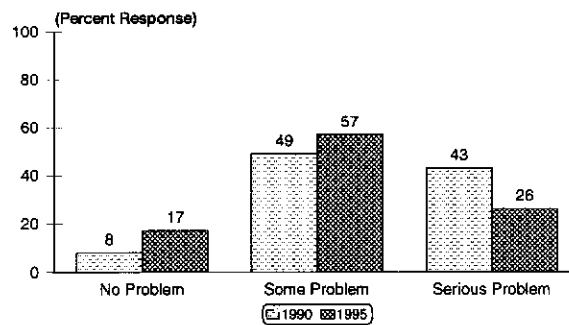


Fig 12. Perceived Severity of AIR Pollution Problems in Gaston County

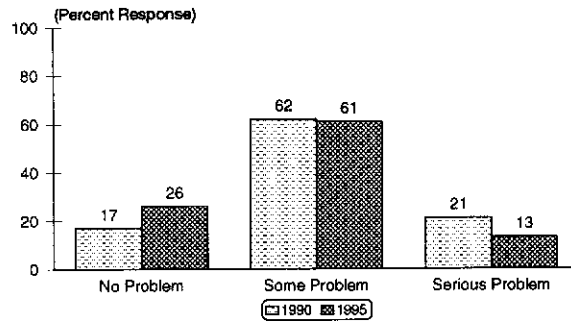


Fig 13. Support for Options to Protect and Improve Environmental Quality in Gaston County

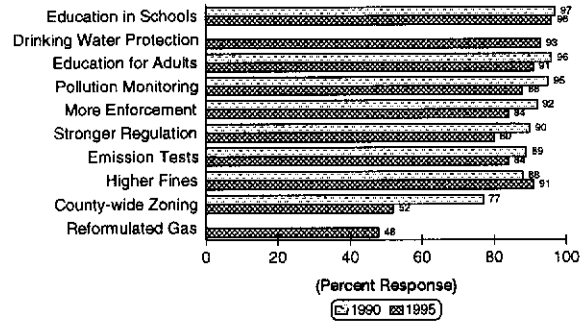


Fig 14. Whether Heard about Problems With Household Hazardous Waste Disposal

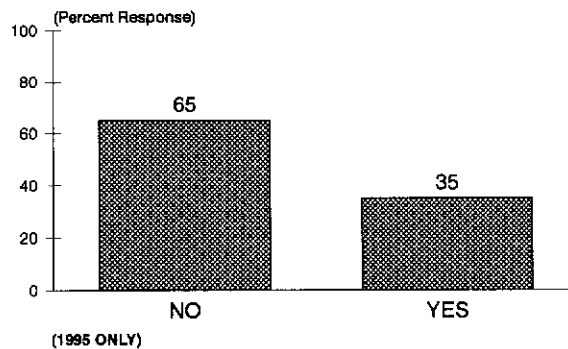


Fig 15. Support for Different Ways to Manage Household Hazardous Waste

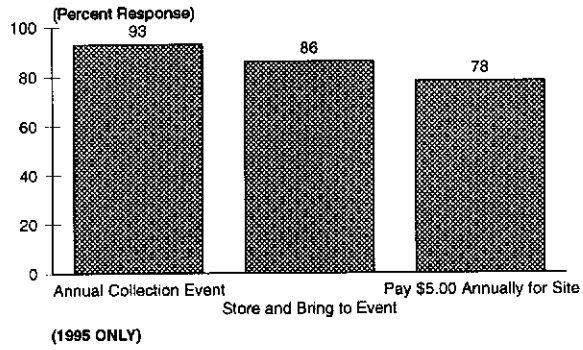


Fig 16. Amount People Would Be Willing to Pay Each Month to Protect Air and Water Quality in Gaston County

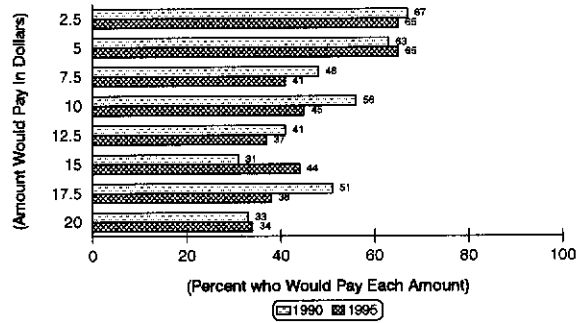


Fig 17. Average ("Median") Willingness to Pay for Improved Air and Water Quality

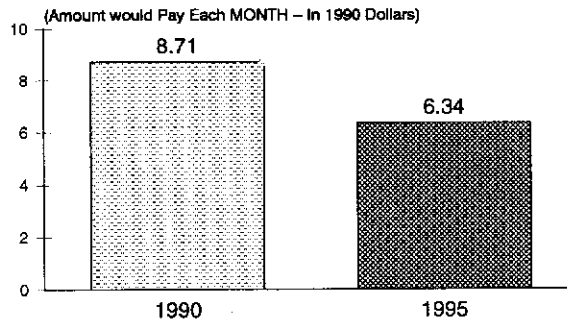


Fig 18. Average ("Median") Willingness to Pay for Improved Air and Water Quality

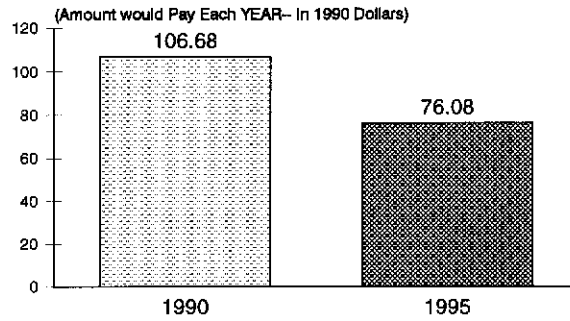


Fig 19. Total Willingness to Pay for Improved Air and Water Quality (All County Families)

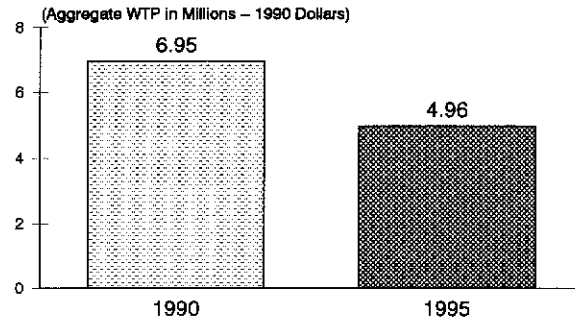


Fig 20. How Additional Money Should be Spent
(Only asked of those who were willing to pay)

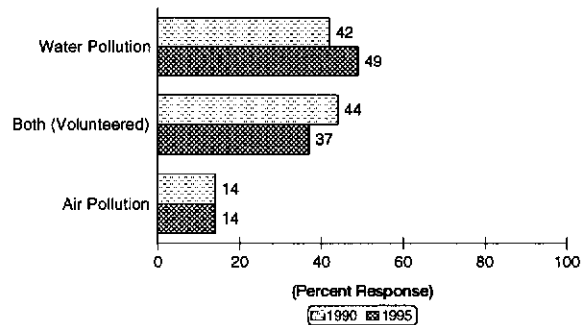


Fig 21. Influences on Willingness to Pay for Environmental Protection

	1990	1995
Age	Negative	None
Income	Positive	Negative
Information Received	Positive	None
Trust in Information	Positive	Positive
Pollution Control	Negative	Negative
Other Concerns	Positive	None

Fig 22. "Most people in Gaston County are willing to accept higher costs to improve air and water quality."

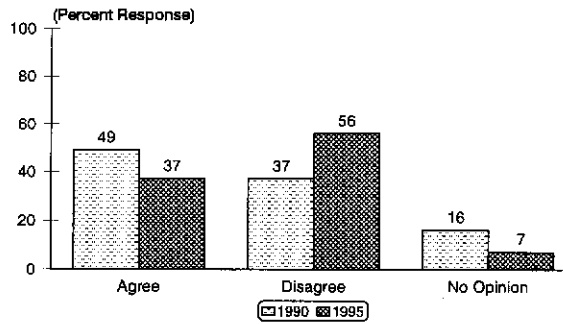


Fig 23. "Protecting the environment is so important that standards cannot be too high and continuing improvements must be made regardless of cost."

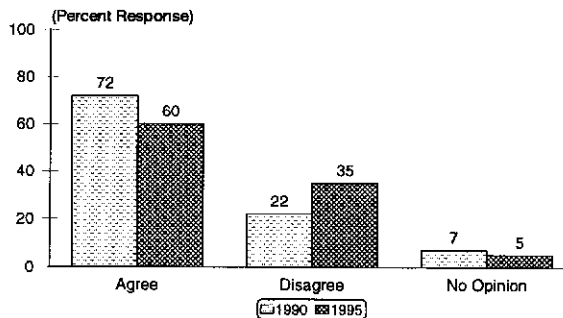


Fig 24. "We should clean up the environment for the sake of future generations."

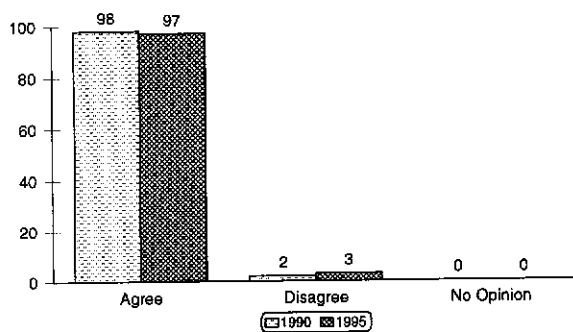


Fig 25. Belief that Government is Doing Too Little to Control WATER Pollution

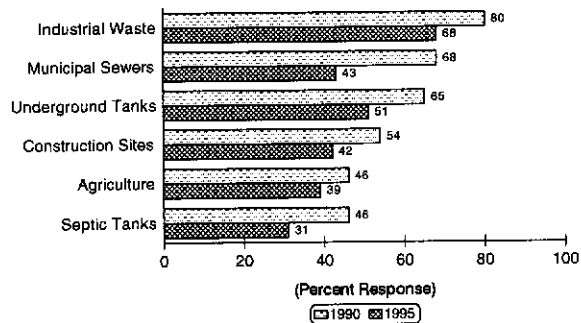


Fig 26. Belief that Government is Doing Too Little to Control AIR Pollution

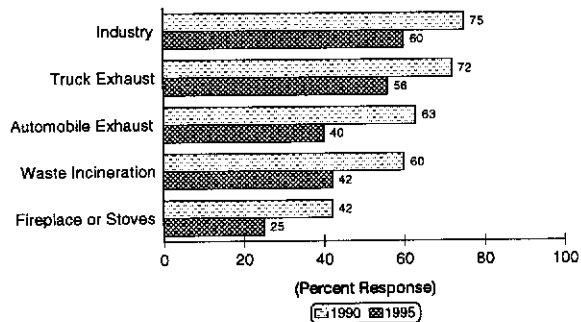


Fig 27. Average Citizens' Amount of Influence Over Government Environmental Decisions

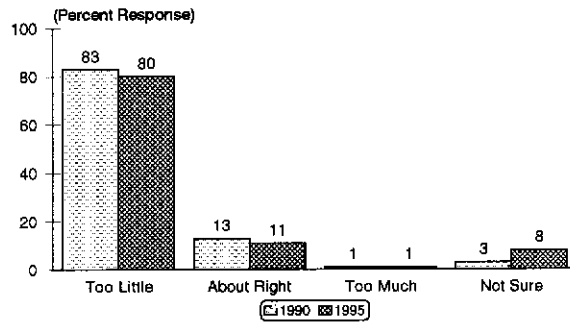


Fig 28. Level of Interest in Learning More about Environmental Issues

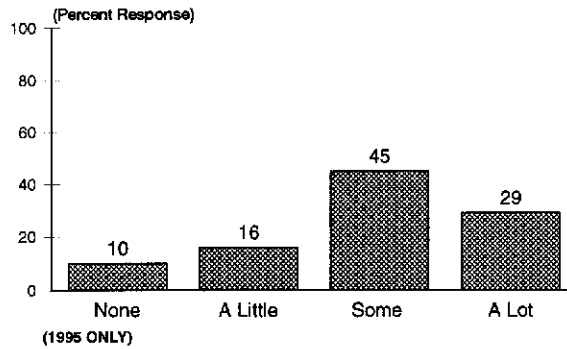


Fig 29. Topics Citizens are Interested In
(Only asked of those with at least "A Little" Interest)

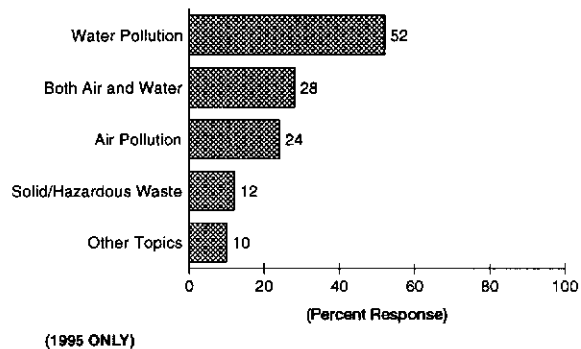


Fig 30a. Trust in Sources of Information about Air and Water Pollution

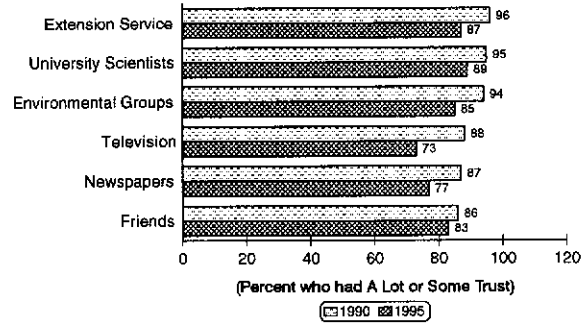


Fig 30b. Trust in Sources of information about Air and Water Pollution (Continued)

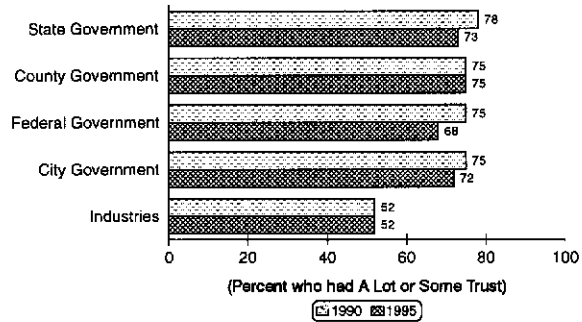


Fig 31. Significant Relationships with Awareness of Environmental Pollution

	1990	1995
Age	Positive	Negative
Gender (Female)	None	None
Educational Level	Positive	Positive
Trust in Information	None	None
Concern for Risks	None	Positive
Problem Perception	Positive	Positive

Fig 32. Significant Relationships with Support for Environmental Management

	1990	1995
Age	Negative	None
Gender (Female)	Positive	Positive
Educational Level	None	None
Trust in Information	None	Positive
Concern for Risks	Positive	Positive
Problem Perception	Positive	Positive