

Keep Up the Good Work

By Bethany Wright, Solid Waste Specialist

The environment affects each one of us. We are aware of the environment. We like the environment. We need the environment.

But how is it doing?

See if you can answer these five questions about the state of the environment in America today.

1. Air pollution in the United States:

- a- Is at the lowest levels ever recorded
- b- Has remained steady for the past decade
- c- Has risen every year for the past decade
- d- Is at the highest levels ever recorded

2. How many animal species have become extinct in America over the last 15 years?

- a- 1 to 5
- b- 5 to 10
- c- 10-50
- d- 50-100

3. The amount of forested land in the US is:

- a- The smallest it has ever been
- b- The same as it was 100 years ago
- c- Steadily increasing for the past 100 years
- d- The highest it has ever been

4. US mercury emissions decreased by what percentage from 1990 to 2000?

- a- 5%
- b- 25%
- c- 45%
- d- 65%

5. How much of the United States is meeting the low levels of sulfur dioxide pollution required by the Federal Clean Air Act?

- a- about 10%
- b- about 25%
- c- about 75%
- d- about 98%

Answers: 1-A, 2-A (only one, in fact), 3-C, 4-C, 5-D

That's good news! Were you surprised by the answers?

Over the last few decades, increasing attention has been paid to pollution, deforestation, species decline, and other environmental problems. It seems that not a week goes by, but we see some alarming report about the Desperate State of the Problem of the Week. We are barraged with a constant stream of political policy debates, proposed regulations, and compliance issues. One group or another is always urging us to repent and turn from our wicked ways.

And Americans are aware. Nearly every person knows something about environmental problems, and in a recent Gallup poll, 62% said they worry "a great deal or a fair amount" about the environment (Pacific Research Institute, 2005). In addition, most people engage in some environmentally positive activity like recycling, using less water, or conserving energy, or polluting less. So, is all that knowledge and all that effort making a difference?

Many studies show that, yes, our efforts have had positive environmental effects. But they also showed that news outlets mainly publicize negative stories. Even though good things are happening, problems and worries get all of the attention. News, education, and even entertainment focus on the environment. Every first grader will tell you that pollution is bad and protecting endangered species is good. As writer Sally Pipes put it, "Air pollution fell again in the United States to its lowest level ever recorded, but hot air over the subject continued to increase."

In contrast to the usual environmental articles, this OAWU report applauds the good things that have been accomplished and thanks you for a job well done. As you read it, be encouraged to continue to keep up the good work.

Facts in this article were taken mainly from the Reader's Digest article entitled *The Good Earth* (April, 2005). That story was in turn based on the 676 annual report released by the Pacific Research Institute called the *2005 Index of Leading Environmental Indicators*, which you can access on the web at www.pacificresearch.org.

Air Quality Air quality has greatly improved over the last 35 years. In fact, air pollution levels are at the lowest ever recorded. Even though Americans drive three times as many miles as they did in 1970, emissions have decreased 54%. This is mostly due to better catalytic technology and cleaner gasoline. A new car in 2005 releases only 4% of the tailpipe emissions of a new car manufactured in 1968. That same kind of emission technology has been applied to power plants. Sulfur dioxide (SO₂), the main cause of acid rain, has decreased 49%, even though much more coal is burned now.

You help improve the air quality every time you

- turn off a light to save electricity
- use the minimum amount of lighter fluid on the barbeque
- comply with tailpipe emissions rules
- compost yard waste instead of burning it

Water Quality Water quality has improved over the last few decades. Contaminant levels are lower, and cases of water borne illness have declined, because of added strict regulations and better treatment methods. 30 years ago, many factories and municipal plants actually released untreated wastes straight into the waterways. “The solution to pollution is dilution” was an accepted practice. Now, nearly all factories have NPDES permits, and barring heavy rains or melts, practically no raw sewage is released from wastewater treatment plants.

You help improve water quality every time you

- dispose of used motor oil responsibly
- take hazardous household products to a collection center
- pick up after your dog
- keep your septic system in good repair

Forests and Habitats In spite of all the new buildings erected to accommodate the increased population of the United States, the amount of forested land has been on the rise for the last 100 years. This is partly because we use electricity or natural gas for heating and cooking, instead of burning wood. Modern farming methods produce more food per acre, allowing old farmland to return to forest. For example, in 1850 Connecticut was 25% forest. Today, over ten times as many people live there, but it is 59% forest. Also, forests’ damaged by acid rain are regaining their health and

vitality. Since only half as much sulfur dioxide (SO₂) is being released into the air, the amount of acid rain has dropped sharply. This has allowed the injured trees to recover.

Healthy, diverse vegetation also improves water quality and shelters wildlife. The more kinds of plants there are, the more different species will have a home. Various predators come to eat the plant-eaters, creating a vibrant and varied community. The water quality is improved by the root system under the tree canopy. Moving water is slowed in its rush to the stream. This gives helpful bacteria time to remove impurities, lets sediments settle out, and allows the water to cool. This clear, cold water supports abundant aquatic life. This is an example of how water, air, vegetation, and animals are all connected together and affect each other. Improving one area often brings improvements to another.

You help improve forest habitats every time you

- buy lumber from managed forests
- drink shade grown coffee
- “take only pictures and leave only footprints”
- grow native plants instead of a large expanse of uniform lawn

Wildlife As the water purity increased and the forests’ flourished, animal populations improved, too. Since 1990, only one species has become extinct in America (the Dusky Seaside Sparrow), and several have been pulled back from the brink of extinction. For example, in 1963, due to extensive hunting and DDT-weakened eggs, there were only 417 known breeding pairs of Bald Eagles. Today, there are over 70,000 Bald Eagles worldwide, and over 7,500 breeding pairs. In 1974, the Timber Wolf was declared an Endangered Species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That protected status has allowed the wolves to increase from a low of approximately 500 to more than 2,500 today. Many other species are being successfully protected by restoring their habitat, curbing hunting, and reducing pollutants.

You support wildlife every time you

- use less toxic products
- follow hunting regulations
- leave habitat undisturbed
- throw trash in the can, instead of littering

These improvements are partially due to advances in technology, changes in the law, and the work of advocacy groups. Inventors create new products, the government passes laws to punish pollution and reward compliance, and various organizations raise money and run programs.

But the main cause is the daily actions of individual people; it is the sum total of millions of individual choices. The real credit lies with the people, who are responsible day in and day out, who follow good practices, who go the extra mile because it is the right thing to do. You made this happen. Because of you, the rivers ripple in beauty, the eagle soars in splendor, and the wild wolf haunts the night. Thank you. Keep up the good work.

The Solid Waste Specialist can create an individualized plan for your organization to create less waste, reduce environmental impacts, and increase general efficiency. To schedule an appointment, call the office at 503-873-8353.