

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RESOURCES:

Documenting Public Opinions to Guide Programs and Implement Policy

This document is a summary of takeaways that could be useful to practitioners and researchers interested in this topic, especially as applied to the Seacoast region of New Hampshire. Generated from “Learning Circle #2,” organized by the [Bridging Human Dimensions Project](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).

Practitioner Context & Challenges

- ★ Understanding of the **make-up and perspectives of potential audiences** provides an **opportunity to tailor approaches and materials** for education, outreach, and technical assistance providers.
- ★ Practitioners are interested in helping local and state decision makers understand the views of their residents.
- ★ Existing public polling and survey results are not always easy to find and/or interpret. This is one of many potential benefits of collaborating to bridge practitioner and researcher skills/expertise.
- ★ There may be **partnership opportunities** for shared data collection and interpretation.

Key Takeaways

- Several recent research efforts to document public opinions in our region provide insight into perspectives of residents in our region, and also serve as examples of possible approaches for gathering information in the future (i.e. polls, surveys, interviews, etc.).
- Polls/surveys can be used for both “lay of the land” opinions on policies to get the texture of public opinion, but can also be used to get a sense of whether a specific proposed policy might pass (i.e. ballot measure language). This type of feedback can be used early on to get a better sense of what a community is most interested in/willing to support or later on to inform outreach and/or advocacy efforts.
- Polls and surveys can be used for a range of purposes. For example, to understand general community make up/demographics, perspectives of different audiences, likelihood of support for different conservation measures, and also provide a setting to test different messaging to see what might resonate with different groups.

KEY FINDINGS OF RECENT PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH IN THE REGION:

- **Great Bay Estuary Resident Views of Water Quality Issues (2023 survey by [FM3 Research](#) on behalf of [TNC](#))**
 - **People value clean water** - Even when people don’t see a specific threat they want to keep water clean, especially drinking water.
 - **Few understand the word “watershed”** - Protecting land to protect water quality makes intuitive sense to people. In practitioner work we need to explain this better, a lot of people don’t know what a watershed is.
 - **Benefits for fish and wildlife are important** - People want safe places for wildlife and they view animals as indicators of health for other watershed users (i.e., people).
 - **Connect conservation to physical and mental health** - People see the value of nature for mental health. This is something that has really emerged recently (especially since the pandemic) and with the advancements of technology. People understand being outside is enriching (spiritually and mentally). There is also lots of public interest in outdoor time/space for youth; the perception is that this counters screen time/the mental health implications of too much screen/technology time.

- o Practitioners may find it helpful in their messaging to provoke the value of **preserving nature for future generations**/make it better, as this is something people indicate is important to them.
- o **Additional findings from the study:**
 - Fewer than one-quarter of residents of the Great Bay estuary can accurately identify their watershed.
 - Water pollution is a broadly shared concern in the region.
 - Residents split on whether they think Great Bay water quality is improving or declining with higher household incomes more likely to believe it has improved.
 - 39% of respondents report they spend time at least once a week around the Great Bay Estuary walking and hiking in nature. Those with the highest and lowest household incomes state they are more likely to spend time in nature as opposed to middle-income residents.
 - Top concerns among Great Bay Estuary Residents include industrial pollution, use of pesticides and fertilizers, and climate change, but nearly all are a “major concern” to at least half of residents.
 - A majority of residents are willing to take steps to improve the Bay's health. As many as three-quarters of residents are willing to reduce the use of chemicals on their lawns, vote for measures to support funding improvements to the Estuary, and to participate in local decision-making on the issue.
- o This project was supported by The Nature Conservancy and conducted by FM3 Research. Project summary, survey guide, overview presentation, and information about methods/design, and additional data are all available from [TNC in this folder](#).
- **Beliefs About Water Policies by Residents in the Seacoast Region (in-progress research by [Dr. Janet Swim, summarized in slides 26-48](#))**
 - o **The project considers links between perceptions of water quality and support for various policy options to improve water quality using “Policy Life Cycle Framework”.**
 - o In the **Lamprey River watershed**, initial findings show that **perceptions of current water quality do not predict support for policy change, while concerns about future water quality do predict support for policy change.**
 - o In the Seacoast Region more broadly, the study is also looking to understand perceptions of conservation easements, impervious surfaces, septic upgrades as specific potential policy approaches to addressing water quality (*Note: These findings have not been published yet, contact Dr. Swim if interested in details*).
 - o **Survey respondents were asked to list three positive and three negative consequences of each policy.** Responses show a pattern of thinking of positive environmental things (e.g., protecting biodiversity, developing natural spaces, and water management), but negative social (e.g., fairness and income inequality, dislike regulations, etc.) and economic (e.g., personal tax increases, diminish available public revenue, etc.) things related to each policy. Meaning, **people tend to think less about the positive social (e.g., better infrastructure, benefits future generation) and economic outcomes of a policy than the environmental outcomes of a policy.**
 - o Survey respondents were also asked about perceptions of support by various groups. Initial findings show that **support for a policy has to do with (1) what people think those close to them will support or oppose, and (2) what they expect as likely positive and negative outcomes.**
- **Hampton Voluntary Elevation and Property Acquisition Survey (2022, NHDES)**
 - o Survey designed with town to understand renters’ and property owners’ perspectives of property elevation and acquisition (discovery-based study) in the context of routine flooding experienced by residents in Hampton, NH. The survey was intended to inform a future program and address/clarify some of the assumptions about what residents need and want and what the town should do.

- o The survey provided valuable information on potential interest from residents (66 interested in elevating their homes should funding become available, 38 interested but not ready to commit; 13 interested in voluntary property acquisition, 63 interested but not ready to commit). Although they may seem low, the numbers were meaningful as before the survey it was unclear if there was any interest at all. This led to a key outcome of the survey having an impact in helping to shift mindsets and increase confidence among decision makers to support flood protection on private property.

Additional examples, related studies, and resources of potential interest:

- **Do You Trust Scientists About the Environment? News Media Sources and Politics Affect NH Resident Views** ([Carsey Brief, Hamilton, 2014](#)). Among other things, the study found that the percentage of NH residents who trust scientists for information about environmental issues is a significantly higher percentage than nationwide (64% in NH versus 54% nationwide).
- **Civic Health Index** ([Carsey Report, Moore-Vissing et. al. 2020](#)). At the time of the report, NH ranked “second in the nation in charitable giving of \$25 or more in the past year,” sixth in the nation in attending public meetings, and seventh in “talking about important political, societal, or local issues with friends and family.”
- **Maine & New Hampshire Coastal Resident Survey** ([Nobelet et al. 2015](#)). Examples of findings from this study included that “67.9% of respondents are willing to contribute to a hypothetical Coastal Water Quality Improvement Program through an increase in monthly water/sewer/septic fees” and that ~71% believe it is their personal responsibility to help solve coastal problems, but more “believe that their neighbors could make changes to improve coastal water quality (61.3%) than believe that they could personally make changes to improve coastal water quality (46.4%).”

Things to Consider When Thinking About Designing a Survey or Poll:

- What is the link between what you want to know, why, and how you are asking?
- Do you need a “[representative sample](#)” or just general sense? While a representative sample is important for generalizability, it is not critical for some projects (i.e. Hampton just wanted to reach people who were interested), versus when you want to be able to say something about a larger group / population.
- Have you defined terms in your survey / interview guide? Don’t assume people understand terms – provide definitions.
- How can you lean on partner resources and networks? Who else is interested in similar topics and may have already collected information or may want to work together on shared questions?
- Will your approach reach who you want to reach? For example, if you’re interested in renter perspectives, using property tax records to contact people may miss them.
- Do you need/want human subjects review? Seeking Institutional Review Board ([IRB](#)) approval may add time to your project, but increases options for sharing data and findings. IRB approval may be required depending on what type of organization you work in and the type of study.

Featured Practitioners and Researchers

Thank you to the following individuals who were part of the Learning Circle that informed this summary:

- [Kirsten Howard](#) - NHDES Coastal Program
- [Janet Swim](#) - The Pennsylvania State University
- [Miranda Everitt](#) - FM3 Research
- [Tracy Keirns](#) - UNH Survey Center

Resources and Data Sources

- Learning Circle 2 [Presentation Slides](#)

- Great Bay Estuary Resident Views of Water Quality Issues ([2023 survey](#) by [FM3 Research](#) for [TNC](#)).
- Hampton Voluntary Elevation and Property Acquisition Survey ([2022, NHDES](#))
- Do You Trust Scientists About the Environment? News Media Sources and Politics Affect NH Resident Views ([Carsey Brief, Hamilton, 2014](#)).
- Civic Health Index ([Carsey Report, Moore-Vissing et. al. 2020](#)).
- Maine & New Hampshire Coastal Resident Survey ([Nobelet et al. 2015](#)).
- Modest Population Gains, but Growing Diversity in New Hampshire with Children in the Vanguard ([Carsey Brief, Johnson, 2021](#))
- New Hampshire's Citizens Value and Use Water in Many Ways: A Preliminary Report of the New Hampshire Water and Watershed Survey ([Rogers, S. & J. Farrell. 2014](#))
- Why People Move to and Stay in New Hampshire ([Johnson and Bundschuch, 2020](#))
- [Census QuickFacts](#) - review demographics by state, county, municipality, etc.
- Strafford Regional Planning Commission [data resources](#)
- Rockingham Planning Commission [data resources](#)
- [UNH Survey Center](#) - information on services, links to reports, etc.
- [Introduction to Survey Design and Delivery](#) - NOAA resource
- [Local Civic Health - A Guide to Building Community and Bridging Divides](#) - section 4 in particular notes tips on community dialogs, survey design, and existing data sets

Project Resources, Contacts, and Feedback: We appreciate your interest in this project and welcome additional questions or ideas for resources that would be useful. In addition, we appreciate hearing feedback on how you may have used this takeaway summary. Please contact Lindsey.Williams@unh.edu.

- A more detailed summary of this Learning Circle discussion [is available at this link](#). Additional shared project files [are available at this link](#).
- Additional takeaway summaries are available on the following topics:
 - Learning Circle 1: [Conceptual Frameworks for Motivating Behavior Change](#)
 - Learning Circle 3: [Understanding and Building Loyalty Among Visitors and Volunteers](#)
 - Learning Circle 4: [Social Science For Communications and Messaging](#)
 - Learning Circle 5: [Drivers of Local Policy Change and the Role of Technical Assistance](#)
- A listing of academic research papers, data sources, and other resources [is available at this link](#).

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