

Some Canadians cynical about climate change: Poll

REBECCA COOK/REUTERS

A poll to be released tomorrow indicates that wealthier Canadians say they are worried about global warming but are reluctant to change their lifestyles in order to fight it. Most say they won't give up their SUVs, like the GMC Yukon XLs pictured above. Email story

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Wealthy, educated Canadians are worried about the threat of global warming — but not enough to give up their gas-guzzling SUVs or lower the thermostats in their homes, a poll to be released Thursday suggests.

The online poll of 3,500 people conducted by Angus Reid Strategies suggests one-third of Canadians consider climate change to be the most important issue facing humanity.

The only other time the environment was this important to the nation was in the late 1980s when fears about acid rain and overflowing landfills gave rise to widespread blue box programs, said chief executive Angus Reid.

“The environment has moved back into first place,” Reid said today. “And there is no question it has huge staying power.”

But even though respondents said they are more concerned about the environment than the health of the economy, Reid said the survey — details of which were to be released Thursday in Montreal — suggests well-educated and wealthy Canadians are the most reluctant to change their behaviour to help the environment.

A majority of respondents weren't interested in driving more fuel-efficient cars, lowering the thermostat in their homes, cutting down on air travel or shortening the length of their morning showers, he said.

The same respondents played down Canada's contribution to climate change, pointing the finger at India and China as bigger polluters, he added.

“People who are wealthier and well-educated often have the most to give up. They're also able to rationalize this thing away,” Reid said. “But all those things that have come to be considered part of an affluent lifestyle are threatened.”

Those people are going to be pitted against the growing number of green converts who were reflected in the poll, Reid said. The survey suggested people in Quebec were the most concerned about the environment and willing to do something about it, while Albertans were the least green-minded.

Three-quarters of Ontario respondents said they were convinced global warming was occurring and almost half said they worried it would significantly impact their lives.

The Angus Reid Strategies survey polled a sample of people online earlier this month and is considered to be accurate plus or minus 1.9 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Chris Winter, executive director of the Conservation Council of Ontario, said despite all the talk about the importance of the environment, there is plenty of evidence that some people aren't taking that to heart.

"You look all around us you see Hummers, SUVs and everybody with their lights on at all hours of the night," he said.

"That would indicate that the message hasn't gotten through yet."

But Winter said it's just a matter of time. Right now, it's easier to convince someone to replace a florescent bulb with an energy-efficient one than it is to pry away the keys to a Hummer, he said.

That may change as global warming becomes a reality, Winter said.

"It's only going to become more predominant as gas prices continue to rise," he said. "This is just the tip of what we're going to be seeing."

David Martin, energy co-ordinator with Greenpeace, said he's optimistic that if people are truly concerned about the state of the environment, then a change in attitude can't be far behind.

Those well-educated, wealthy Canadians are the ones who are in the best position to "go green" by retrofitting their home or buying a hybrid car, he said.

"More disposable income gives you greater choice in green technologies," Martin said.