



HOW AMERICANS RELATE TO
water

A preliminary qualitative study conducted by
the APM Research Lab and Wilder Research for

the
WATER MAIN

thewatermain.org | [@thewatermain](https://twitter.com/thewatermain)

the
WATER MAIN

The Water Main connects Americans to the value of water in our lives. We do this as a new hub for dialogue, reporting, convening, research and engagement at American Public Media. We aim to bring people together across political, cultural, social and economic divides to mobilize new thinking and action that secures clean, abundant, accessible water for all.

About This Study

Americans are increasingly asked to make important decisions about managing our collective water resources. To do so, we believe that people need both Water IQ, an understanding of key issues, and Water EQ, a personal connection to water. The Water Main has begun our work by highlighting the central and complex role that water plays in our lives—from our economy, to our well-being, to our food, and even to our cultural and spiritual identities.

But as we dive deeper into that work, we wanted to know:

How do Americans relate to water?

To shed light on that question, The Water Main partnered with the **APM Research Lab**, the research arm of American Public Media, and **Wilder Research** to conduct this national study that asked Americans just that. For this study, a total of 201 surveys were completed with respondents from 11 selected regions of the United States, for an overall response rate of 5.5%.

This exploratory study begins to break ground on a topic that is not yet well understood. We anticipate using the insight gleaned here to direct additional research. Because the study was not representative in scope, results should not be generalized to the U.S. population. However, we share our preliminary findings with the hope that they spark conversation about how to make water visible, relevant and meaningful to a wider audience.

Necessity and Dependence

When respondents were asked about the first thing they think of when it comes to water in their lives, the majority talked about necessity and dependence.

“ It’s essential to my existence... I couldn’t make...macaroni and cheese or shower without it. Clean water specifically. My pets depend on it. It’s intrinsic to one’s life and livelihood.

People are talking about what they are hearing

We also found that respondents’ most recent conversation about water was similar to the most recent water-related media coverage they had encountered.



54%

of respondents (highest share) had most recently encountered a water-related news story about an environmental issue

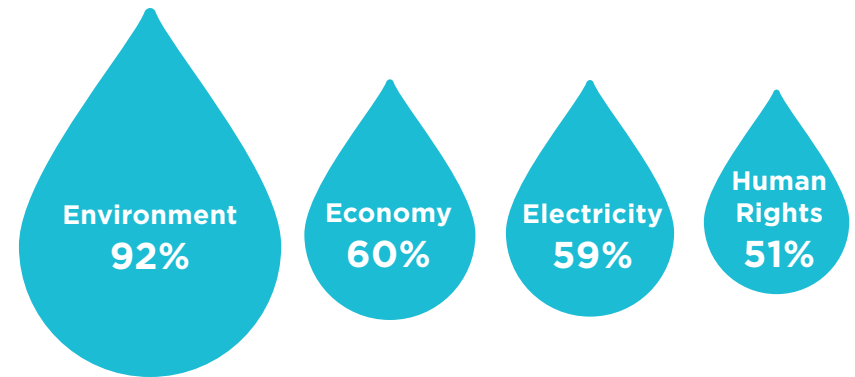


32%

of respondents (highest share) said their most recent conversation about water was related to environmental issues

But people relate to water beyond environmental concerns

When asked, respondents also expressed a strong relationship between water and other aspects of society, even when they aren’t hearing about them in the media. We see an opportunity to more deeply engage with respondents about water and its connection to other societal topics where they see a strong relationship, like economy, electricity and human rights.



Another interesting point is **what didn’t show up.**

For instance, we did not hear much explicitly about water infrastructure from respondents, despite EPA statistics widely shared that the U.S. will need **\$472 billion** in

infrastructure improvements over

the next 20 years to continue providing safe drinking water.



How Water Connects to My Life

There is an opportunity to engage respondents more deeply by meeting them where they see a connection with water and their lives.

Respondents who indicated a strong relationship between water and:



For example, when it comes to food, respondents note the importance of water in every step of the process of food production, from agriculture to fishing to cooking.

"Fishing. Boating and fishing on the water. Makes me think of food, like fried fish and shrimp."

"Your everyday use of it to grow food, water your plants, feed your animals, clean your laundry, bathing and use in the house."

Perception Gap

Respondents individually understand our intrinsic connection to water for our own survival and well-being, and they had a difficult time thinking of what additional information they wanted to know about water.

"Personally, I know quite a bit about water. If I want to know more, I will look it up."

But respondents had plenty to share on what other people need to know, with 100% of respondents having an opinion.

"I just think they need to be more educated on what's actually in the water. All of it actually, swimming, etc. What makes it safe to swim in some waters?"

Surprisingly, what respondents think "others need to know" is already at the forefront of most respondents' minds.

- 45% said people need to know about the importance of water and its value in our lives
- 36% felt it was important for people to know about how to protect water resources
- 15% felt that safety issues were important for people to know about

That tells us that at the individual level, people can see and articulate the value of water to their lives. But they don't necessarily see that same value reflected by their neighbor, in their community or in society broadly.

Leveraging Personal Connections

It became clear that leveraging respondents' personal connections to water could be a gateway to increasing their Water IQ and Water EQ.

More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) feel a personal connection to a specific body of water.

When asked a follow-up question about information they might like to have about the body of water they felt a connection to, nearly 30% of respondents said they wanted information about water quality.

Connecting Water to My Interests

In the interest of connecting water to audiences' interests and values, we identified at least three preliminary categories of core interests and values: outdoor, personal and societal. While this initial study is limited to our respondents, these value segments can be seen as a first step in defining meaningful engagement options for different audience segments.

OUTDOOR | The Outdoor Recreation Enthusiast



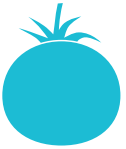
Interested in:

- Fishing
- Boating
- Swimming

Connects with water through:

- Their favorite body of water
- Science-related information
- Their heritage

PERSONAL | The Day-to-Day User



Interested in:

- Health
- Food
- Education

Connects with water through:

- Food
- Drinking water and hygiene
- Job/career
- Cost of living

SOCIETAL | The Social Impact Citizen



Interested in:

- Arts
- Science
- Culture

Connects with water through:

- Environmental issues
- Societal well-being (economy, human rights, foreign policy)
- Spirituality