

First-of-its-kind 14-country study ranks consumers according to environmental behavior



The Goods sub-index, a combination of everyday consumption and waste disposal plus ownership of big-ticket items, consists of such variables as purchase and/or avoidance of specific products for environmental reasons, avoidance of excessive packaging, preference for reusable goods over disposable products and for used goods over new items, willingness to pay an environmental premium, recycling, and number of TVs, PCs, refrigerators, dishwashers and laundry machines per household member. Consumers in China, India and Brazil decisively top the ranking with widespread preference for green products and ownership of relatively few appliances and expensive electronic devices. US consumers score lowest. Photo by Colin Monteath/Midden Pictures
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The National Geographic Society and the international polling firm GlobeScan today unveiled a new mechanism for measuring and comparing individual consumer behavior as it relates to the environment. “Greendex™ 2008: Consumer Choice and the Environment — A Worldwide Tracking Survey” looks at environmentally sustainable consumption and behavior among consumers in 14 countries.

This first-of-its-kind study reveals surprising differences between consumers in developed and developing countries in terms of environmentally friendly actions. This year’s results are a baseline against which results of future annual surveys will be compared, in order to monitor improvements or declines in environmentally sustainable consumption at both the global level and within countries.

The Greendex survey was conducted online earlier this year among 14,000 consumers in Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India, Japan, Mexico, Russia, Spain and the United States. A panel of 27 international experts in global sustainability helped identify which consumer behaviors were most crucial to investigate. One thousand people in each country answered questions that measured their behavior in the areas of housing, transportation, food and consumption of goods; each respondent earned a score that reflected the environmental impact of his or her consumption patterns, which included size and energy-efficiency of residence, commuting mode and distance and use of fresh water, among dozens of other measures. Consumers were then assigned a Greendex score (a measure of the relative environmental sustainability of their consumption patterns) out of 100. Consumers in Brazil and India scored highest; U.S. consumers scored lowest.

Greendex vs. Other Environmental Studies

Unlike other measures that rank countries according to the environmental performance of their governments, businesses and other factors, the Greendex is the first to rank the performance of individual consumers, rather than countries as a whole. The results are strikingly different from existing performance rankings like the Environmental Performance Index, the Environmental Sustainability Index or Ecological

Footprint.

“The Greendex gives us an unprecedented, meaningful look at how consumers across the globe are behaving,” said Terry Garcia, National Geographic’s executive vice president of Mission Programs. “It will allow us over time to assess the progress that people are making to conserve, minimize waste and protect natural resources for the future. Consumers who score highest have a responsibility to maintain their behavior and provide an example to those who need to improve. We hope the study inspires all consumers, particularly those in countries where consumers scored lowest, to adopt the best behaviors of those who scored well, and that consumers in countries with expanding economies, who may consume more in the future, will do so responsibly.”

Determining Consumption

Consumption as measured by the Greendex is determined both by the choices consumers actively make — such as repairing rather than replacing items, using cold water to wash laundry, choosing green products rather than environmentally unfriendly ones — and choices that are controlled more by their circumstances — such as the climate they live in or the availability of green products or public transport. The initiative considered both of these factors, with 60 percent of the 65-variable index based on choice or discretionary behavior.

“The Greendex shows us that consumers’ choices play a large role in their environmental footprint. Governments and businesses, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure that environmentally friendly options are available and affordable to all consumers, especially those in the developing countries, whose index rankings may fall as economies grow and consumption patterns change,” said Thomas Lovejoy, president of the Heinz Center for Science, Economics and the Environment, chairman of National Geographic’s Conservation Trust and an adviser to the Greendex project.

GlobeScan President Doug Miller added, “The Greendex initiative is ground-breaking. Never before has such a comprehensive survey been applied across a wide range of countries to scientifically track consumer behaviors related to the environment. While other surveys look at attitudes and intentions, the Greendex tracks actions that matter.”

Consumer Greendex Rankings by Country

The findings show that consumers in Brazil and India tie for the highest Greendex score for environmentally sustainable consumption at 60 points each. They are followed by consumers in China (56.1), Mexico (54.3), Hungary (53.2) and Russia (52.4). Among consumers in wealthy countries, those in Great Britain, Germany and Australia each have a Greendex score of 50.2, those in Spain register a score of 50.0 and Japanese respondents, 49.1. U.S. consumers have the lowest Greendex score at 44.9. The other lowest-scoring consumers are Canadians with 48.5 and the French with 48.7.

There are signs that index rankings are set to change as people in developing countries become more economically successful and adopt more consumptive behaviors. Findings show that consumers in countries with emerging economies aspire to higher material standards of living and believe people in all countries should have the same living standards as those in the wealthiest countries.

Consumers in Developing vs. Developed Countries

While the survey found encouraging signs that individuals in all the surveyed countries feel empowered when it comes to the environment and are taking some action in their daily lives to reduce consumption and waste, it found that those in developing countries are the most concerned and that the behavior and personal choices of consumers in developing countries were more environmentally friendly than those in developed

countries.

Consumers in developing countries feel more responsible for environmental problems than those in developed countries, and six in 10 people in developing countries report that environmental problems are negatively affecting their health — twice as many as in most developed countries. Moreover, consumers in developing countries feel strongest that global warming will worsen their way of life in their lifetime, are the most engaged when it comes to talking and listening about the environment, feel the most guilt about their environmental impact and are willing to do the most to minimize that impact. Their behavior reflects their concern. People in developing countries are more likely to:

- Live in smaller residences;
- Prefer green products and own relatively few appliances or expensive electronic devices;
- Walk, cycle, or use public transportation, and choose to live close to their most common destination.

By contrast, consumers in developed countries, who have more environmentally friendly options to choose from, often don't make those choices.

- They have larger homes and are more likely to have air-conditioning.
- They generally own more cars, drive alone most frequently and use public transport infrequently.
- They are least likely to buy environmentally friendly products and to avoid environmentally unfriendly products.

U.S. consumers scored worse than those in any other country, developing or developed, on housing, transportation and goods. They are by far the least likely to use public transportation, to walk or bike to their destinations or to eat locally grown foods. They have among the largest average residence size in the survey. Only 15 percent say they minimize their use of fresh water.

Discover Your Greendex Score

Individuals around the world can find out where they rank on the Greendex scale by visiting nationalgeographic.com/greendex and taking an abbreviated survey. They can also examine the Greendex survey results by country, measure their knowledge of some basic green issues against what others around the world know, and get tips on living a more environmentally friendly lifestyle. "National Geographic has been committed to caring for the environment for many years, and part of our mission is to help people understand how they can reduce their impact on the planet. We hope people will be inspired to look at how their own behavior is affecting the environment and take steps to minimize their environmental footprint," the Society's Terry Garcia said.

Market Basket

To provide context for the Greendex results, National Geographic and GlobeScan also developed a "Market Basket," a set of national macroeconomic indicators of consumption in four areas important to environmentally sustainable behavior — energy, transportation, travel and consumer goods. The data, gathered by the Economist Intelligence Unit, mirrors in part the consumer behavior measured by the Greendex survey. The purpose of the Market Basket is to provide an external estimate of changes in consumer behavior over time, while acknowledging that industry and government also play a critical role. The Greendex, for example, measures things consumers are doing to save energy in a country; the Market Basket measures whether total energy consumption in the country is actually going up or down. The Market Basket will also establish a framework for comparing the relative environmental impact of each country's size and rate of growth, over time.

Current Market Basket data validate the 2008 Greendex rankings, with actual energy consumption aligned with each country's Greendex score. More importantly, however, the Market Basket data suggest that if

current growth rates are sustained in certain countries in 2008, Greendex rankings may change considerably in the near future.

Source: National Geographic Society

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