

Etowah River Basin: A Study of Environmental Attitudes

Conducted by the A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, GA on behalf of: Limestone Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council, The Nature Conservancy, University of Georgia Institute of Ecology, Upper Etowah River Alliance, January 2003.

Executive Summary

During the Fall, 2002 the A.L. Burruss Institute of Public Service at Kennesaw State University conducted telephone interviews on behalf of Limestone Valley, RC&D, The Nature Conservancy, the University of Georgia, Institute of Ecology and the Upper Etowah River Alliance. The purpose of this study was to ascertain the views and opinions on a number of environmental issues among residents of the Etowah River Basin. A total of 1107 interviews were completed; Four hundred and five from respondents living in the Upper River Basin of the Etowah River and 702 completed with respondents living in the Lower Etowah River Basin.

This report is divided into three sections. Section 1 examines the responses of those respondents who live in the Upper Etowah River Basin and Section 2 reviews responses to the same questions among the lower river basin respondents. Table and figure formats are identical for the first two sections. Comparisons between resident groups can be made by examining Figure A-1 to Figure A-2. A third section compares means of scaled responses by demographic factors including whether the respondent is a home owner, gender of the respondents, and whether the respondent lives in the Upper or Lower Etowah River Basin.

Notable highlights for Section 1; Upper Etowah River Basin Respondents include:

- When asked about the effectiveness of various methods of providing information about the Etowah River Basin, upper basin respondents indicated that TV, Radio were the most effective. Newspaper advertisements and educational materials distributed through the schools were also seen as effective.
- When asked about methods of contacting public officials, over 37% of upper river basin respondents indicated that they had spoken to public officials or written letters. Less frequent methods of contact included signing petitions (24%), attending meetings (22%), or writing letters to newspaper editors (9%).
- Although over 70% of respondents indicated that they were aware that they lived in the Etowah River Basin, very few upper river basin respondents (9%) indicated that they were active in environmental organizations. When asked about specific organizations, numbers were extremely low, with less than 1% indicating that they were active in organizations suggested by the interviewers. In later questions, when asked to name organizations that were specifically responsible for monitoring and developing long-range plans to protect the Etowah River Basin, very few respondents were able to mention any organizations specifically. The most noted organization was the US Environmental Protection Agency with only 16 responses (4%).

- Although many respondents indicated that they were very interested (48%) or somewhat interested (46%) in public policy, they also were likely to cite time (54%) and lack of information (18%) as obstacles to involvement.
- When asked where they believed their drinking water originated, a plurality (22%) indicated that they believed that Lake Lanier was the source of their drinking water. Slightly over one fifth of the respondents did not have any idea as to the source of their drinking water.
- In a series of questions regarding opinions on development and preservation, respondents reflected views that supported restricting development to protect wildlife, and also supported personal conservation of water. However, a majority also agreed that restricting property owners' use of land was a violation of property rights.
- A majority felt that water in the Etowah River Basin was good (30%) or fair (24%).
- When asked a series of questions about threats to water quality, industrial waste, wastewater plant discharge and septic tank leaks were most often cited. The respondents viewed trash, fertilizer runoff and erosion and sediment as less serious threats.
- A second series of questions concerning development and policy indicated that overwhelming majorities of respondents felt that buffer areas were helpful (89%), that sediment and erosion were serious threats (84%) and that diversity of fish and other aquatic life are essential to the health of the Etowah River Basin (92%). Less uniformity was found in responses to questions about the Endangered Species Act with 29% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was too restrictive, and 50% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with that statement.
- Respondents were asked about their support for future policies. At least 50% of the respondents indicated support for all policies suggested: increasing buffers, creation of regional development plans, stormwater regulations for new development, septic tank inspection and, most favorably, the purchase of land for greenspace.
- The most important reason noted by respondents for protecting the quality of water was to maintain water quality for drinking.
- The state was the most often cited (38%) as the level of government that respondents felt should take on decision making for environmental issues. Local governments were the next most often identified (28%), with 11% of respondents identifying the federal government as the level of government that should be responsible for environmental policy.
- Over 65% of respondents in the upper river basin felt that water quality in the Etowah River was likely to get a little or much worse in the near future.

Notable highlights for Section 2; Lower Etowah River Basin Respondents include:

- When asked about effective means for distribution of information on environmental issues, TV/Radio and educational materials distributed in schools were most often noted as very effective (44.7% and 39.7%, respectively).
- When asked whether they had engaged in activities to influence opinion, 28.5% indicated that they had spoken or written to elected officials, 14% indicated that they had attended public meetings, 20% had signed petitions, and 4% had written letters to the editor.
- Although 66% indicated that they were aware that they lived in the Etowah River Basin, 94% indicated that they were not active in any environmental organization.

- Most residents were either very interested (45%) or somewhat interested (47%) in public policy. Lack of time (53%) and lack of information (23%) were most often cited as the obstacles to involvement in environmental organizations.
- When asked to identify the source of their drinking water, the most frequent response was that the respondent did not know (33%). Others believed that their drinking water originated from groundwater (13.5%) and Lake Allatoona (18%).
- When asked questions concerning economic development and conservation efforts, respondents were more divided than upper river basin respondents. While slightly over 50% agreed or strongly agreed that urban/suburban expansion was essential to economic development, over 40% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. Over 92% did agree or strongly agree that local governments should restrict development in some areas to protect the environment.
- Approximately half of the respondents thought that water quality was good (24.6%) or fair (26.1%). More than half felt that it would get a little worse in the next five years (38%) or a lot worse (29.9%).
- As in the responses of the upper basin residents, point sources were seen as greater threats to the environment than were non-point sources. Industrial waste, wastewater plant discharge and septic tank leaks were seen as the greatest threats. Runoff from fertilizer and stormwater, erosion and sediment were not as likely to be noted as serious threats to water quality by lower river basin respondents.
- Respondents expressed support for environmental policies including purchase of greenspace, stormwater regulations for development, and regional development planning (59.8%, 59.1% and 57.7% indicating that they were very supportive, respectively).
- Almost three fourths of all respondents (73%) indicated that the most important reason for protection the quality of rivers and streams was to protect drinking water.
- When asked which level of government should address environmental policy 35% of respondents indicated that the state should have that responsibility, 26% said that environmental policy should be the responsibility of the local governments, and 17% said the federal government was the appropriate level.
- Very few lower river basin respondents were familiar with any organizations responsible for monitoring and developing long range plans to protect the Etowah River Basin. Over 84% could not name any organization with that charge.

Notable highlights for Section 3; Comparison of Responses by Demographic Characteristics, include:

- Most residents were aware that they lived in the Etowah River Basin (72% of upper river basin residents and 67% of lower river basin residents).
- Groups of other demographic characteristics (such as gender, home ownership) did not show statistically significant differences.
- Although lower river basin residents were more likely to indicate that urban/suburban expansion was essential to economic health of the region, they also were more likely to agree that continuous efforts and education were important.
- Upper river basin respondents were more likely to know, or believe that they know, the source of their drinking water. Over one third of lower basin respondents indicated that they did not know the source of the drinking water.

- Overall, respondents in upper and lower river basins held similar views on economic development and public policies regarding water quality protection.