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Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey 2006

HVRF Working Paper No: 1/07

INTRODUCTION

The Hunter Valley Research Foundation (HVRF) has regularly monitored the attitudes of residents of the Hunter Region towards the environment. The 2006 Hunter Region Environmental Attitudes Survey was designed to gauge Hunter residents' opinions about a number of specific and high profile environmental issues, including climate change, nuclear power, and recycled water usage.

SUMMARY

In summary, Hunter residents,

Agreed that:
- Threats to the environment are not exaggerated
- Climate change will have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years
- The actions of the average person can have an impact on slowing climate change.

Supported:
- A balance between the needs of the environment and people
- Paying more for electricity to ensure a constant supply in the future
- Paying more for electricity if it was generated from renewable sources such as solar or wind
- Paying extra taxes, or making donations to conservation organisations, if the money is spent on work to improve the environment
- More land being made available in the future for residential development, rather than increasing the housing density in existing urban areas
- Using recycled water for washing clothes, flushing toilets, washing cars and watering gardens.

Were divided on:
- The acceptability of nuclear energy as an alternative to coal-based energy for Australia
- Whether the benefits to the Region of the coal industry outweigh the negative impacts
- Whether improvements in technology would do more to solve environmental problems compared with people making changes to their lifestyle.

Opposed:
- Drinking recycled water
- Higher water prices as a method to discourage water use.

METHODS

Data collection
The survey was administered on the HVRF's computer aided telephone interviewing (CATI) system between 15 November and 5 December 2006 as part of the December quarter Hunter Region Domestic Omnibus survey.

Survey area
Hunter Region Statistical Division, New South Wales, Australia.

Sample selection
310 randomly selected residents throughout the survey area from households with landline telephone connections.

Contact telephone numbers for households were generated using a random digit dialling methodology for number ranges within the survey area.

Participants
Individuals in the household aged 18 years or older, with random selection amongst the total number of adults in that household, and the use of five calls back, i.e. households were contacted by telephone and an attempt was made to interview a randomly selected adult within that household.

In the event that the household did not answer or the required respondent was not at home, a minimum of five additional calls was made to contact the household and/or interview the selected respondent.

Data handling
Recorded responses were statistically weighted by:

- The number of people living in the household and eligible for interview. This weighting procedure ensures that people living in larger households are given the same proportional representation as people living in smaller households.

- The age and sex of the population aged 18 and over living in the Hunter Region. This weighting procedure further ensures that the sample was representative of the survey population.

Survey response rate
From a total of 409 eligible respondents contacted, 310 completed the questionnaire. This represents a survey response rate of 75.8 per cent.

Statistical analysis
Statistical significance has been measured at the 95 per cent confidence level. Note that a *significant* difference referred to in this paper means a *statistically* significant difference.

The following tests were applied to determine statistically significant differences between mean scores for survey questions:

- Independent Samples T Test, Analysis of variance (ANOVA), Kruskal-Wallis tests and Mann-Whitney tests. A statistically significant result indicates a difference in the *mean ratings* that is considered to be a *true* difference and not a difference attributable to chance.

Tests for statistically significant differences were conducted for the following variables:

- Gender
- Age group.

Where statistically significant differences were found between groups, the results have been presented in the report.

A number of the questions/statements used were adapted from previous studies and the results have been presented where they are directly comparable.

Mean scores
For the majority of statements in this study an agreement rating scale was used, where 1=*strongly disagree*, 2=*disagree*, 3=*neither disagree nor agree*, 4=*agree*, and 5=*strongly agree*.

A mean score is calculated for each of the statements based on the number of responses recorded for each point on the scale. A mean agreement score of 1.0 would therefore indicate that all respondents who provided a rating *strongly disagreed* with the specified statement; conversely, a mean score of 5.0 would indicate that they all *strongly agreed*. Therefore, a higher score represents a relatively higher level of agreement with the statement.

When reviewing the results it is important to consider:

- The *distribution* of ratings, since this may be masked in the mean score: for example, ratings which are evenly spread over the 1 to 5 scale may yield the same mean score as those which are relatively polarised at either end of the scale.

- The level of non-response (i.e. *Don't Know* and *Refused* responses), as these responses are not used in the calculation of the mean score.

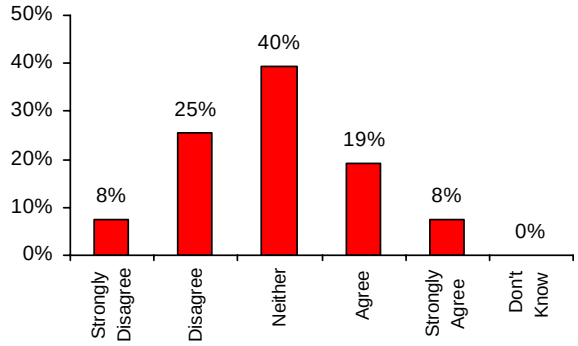
RESULTS

Attitudes towards the environment

Respondents were asked to rate how strongly they disagreed or agreed with the statement: *Looking after the needs of the environment is more important than looking after the needs of people*.

The largest proportion of respondents (40%) *neither disagreed nor agreed* with the statement. One-third of respondents *disagreed* (25%) or *strongly disagreed* (8%), while one-quarter *agreed* (19%) or *strongly agreed* (8%).

Figure 1 Looking after the needs of the environment is more important than looking after the needs of people



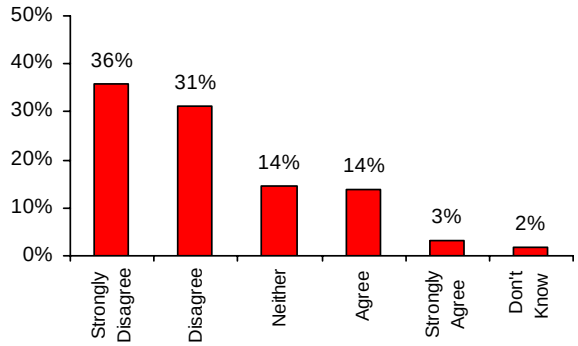
SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Overall the statement recorded a mean agreement score of 2.9 (i.e. closest to 3.0 *neither*). This relatively "neutral" response suggests that, on the whole, respondents preferred a balance of human and environmental needs. This response may vary however, depending upon the issue.

Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they disagreed or agreed with the statement: *Threats to the environment are exaggerated*.

More than three-quarters of respondents either *strongly disagreed* (36%) or *disagreed* (31%) with the statement, while less than one-fifth of respondents *agreed* (14%) or *strongly agreed* (3%).

Figure 2 Threats to the environment are exaggerated

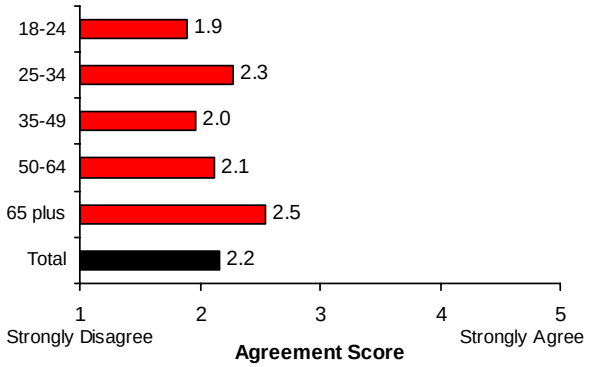


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Overall the statement recorded a mean agreement score of 2.2 (i.e. closest to 2.0 *disagree*). This score suggests that on the whole respondents felt that threats to the environment are not exaggerated.

Respondents from the 65+ years age group were significantly more likely to be sceptical about the suggestions of threats to the environment than the respondents from the other age groups. This result was similar to that found in research conducted for *The Australia Institute*[1]. Interestingly though, the responses by people in the 18-24 years age group in *The Australia Institute* study were at a similar level to those of the 65+ group. However, in this HVRF study the 18-24 years age group recorded the lowest level of agreement with the statement, of all of the age groups.

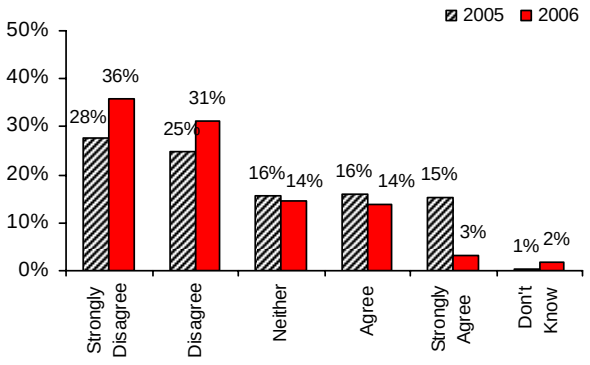
Figure 2a Threats to the environment are exaggerated – Mean Score by Age Group



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Compared with the results from the 2005 HVRF Omnibus Survey[2], the overall level of disagreement with the statement has increased. Between the two survey periods the proportion of respondents who *strongly disagreed* increased from 28 to 36 per cent, and the proportion who *disagreed* increased from 25 to 31 per cent. It is also worth noting that the proportion of respondents who *strongly agreed* with the statement decreased from 15 to 3 per cent.

Figure 2b Threats to the environment are exaggerated – 2005 vs 2006



SOURCE: HVRF, 2005 & 2006

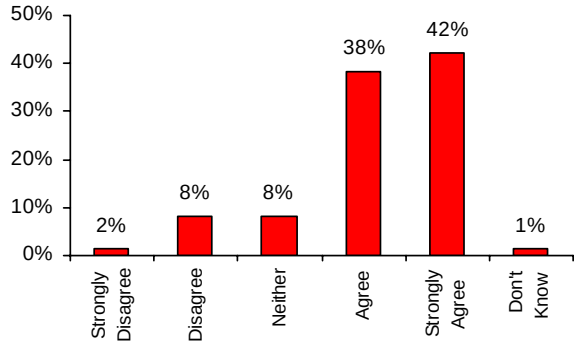
This suggests that Hunter residents are taking threats to the environment more seriously.

Climate change

During 2006 the issue of climate change, or global warming, and the responses to it, continued to have a high profile. The ongoing drought throughout most of Australia, and the commentary on its causes and responses to it, probably had the greatest impacts on the broader community's perceptions of the issue. This profile may also have been enhanced through the local release of the climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* and its associated media coverage.

The large majority of respondents either *agreed* (38%) or *strongly agreed* (42%) that climate change would have a direct impact on their lives in the next 20 years.

Figure 3 Climate change will have a direct impact on my life in the next 20 years

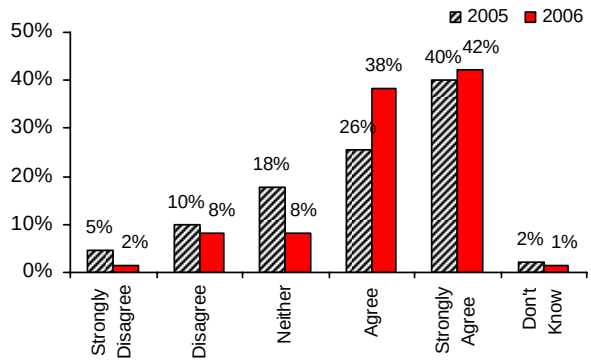


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 4.1 (i.e. closest to 4.0 *agree*) suggesting that, on the whole, respondents believed that climate change will have a direct impact on their life.

Compared with the results from the 2005 HVRF Omnibus Survey[2], the level of agreement with the statement has increased. Between the two surveys the proportion of respondents who *agreed* with the statement increased from 26 to 38 per cent, and those who *strongly agreed* increased from 40 to 42 per cent.

Figure 3a Climate change will have a direct impact on my life in the next 20 years – 2005 vs 2006

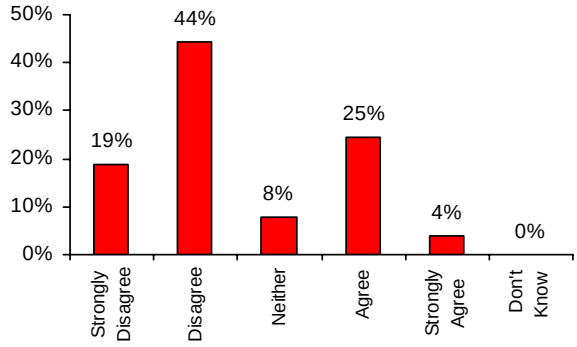


SOURCE: HVRF, 2005 & 2006

NB The 2005 statement used the term "global warming" rather than "climate change".

When asked whether they felt that the actions of the average person have little impact on slowing climate change, the majority of respondents *disagreed* (44%) or *strongly disagreed* (19%). However, almost one-third of respondents *agreed* (25%) or *strongly agreed* (4%) with the statement.

Figure 4 The actions of the average person have little impact on slowing climate change

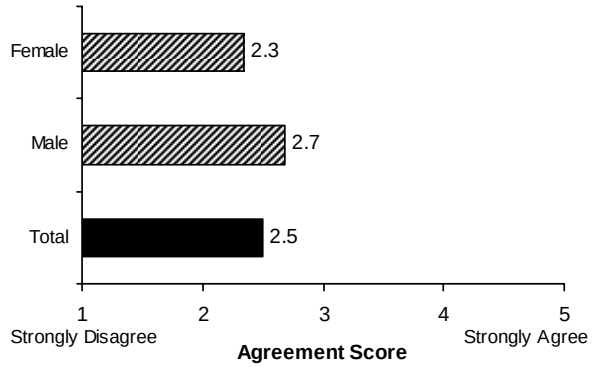


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

This statement recorded a mean agreement score of 2.5 (i.e. between 2.0 *disagree* and 3.0 *neither*). This response indicates that, on the whole, respondents believed that the actions of the average person can have an impact on slowing climate change.

Females were significantly more likely than males to believe that the actions of the average person can have an impact on slowing climate change.

Figure 4a The actions of the average person have little impact on slowing climate change – Mean Score by Gender



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Managing domestic water use

Drought affected much of Australia during 2006 and continued to have a significant impact on agricultural production as well as on domestic water supplies which, in some areas, reached critical levels. Water conservation/management was also nominated as the most important environmental initiative for the NSW Government in the next few years[3].

In response to the decreasing water supply in their area the Council of Toowoomba, in Queensland, initiated a program called *Water Futures Toowoomba* and held a referendum on whether purified recycled water should be added to their water supply[4]. The vote was held on 29 July 2006 and the proposal was defeated with the result: *No* 62%, *Yes* 38%.

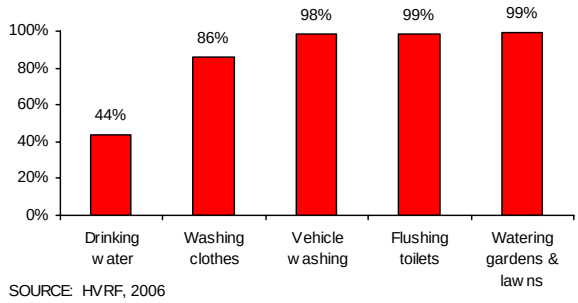
In this survey respondents were asked whether they would be prepared to use appropriately treated recycled water for five specified household uses, presented in random order to each respondent:

- Drinking water
- Flushing toilets
- Washing clothes
- Vehicle washing
- Watering gardens and lawns.

Drinking water was the least supported use for recycled water, with less than half (44%) of the respondents supporting this suggestion.

The large majority of respondents were prepared to use recycled water for *washing clothes* (86%), and almost all respondents said that they would *wash vehicles* (98%), *flush toilets* (99%), or *water gardens and lawns* (99%) with recycled water.

Figure 5 Uses for recycled water – Yes%

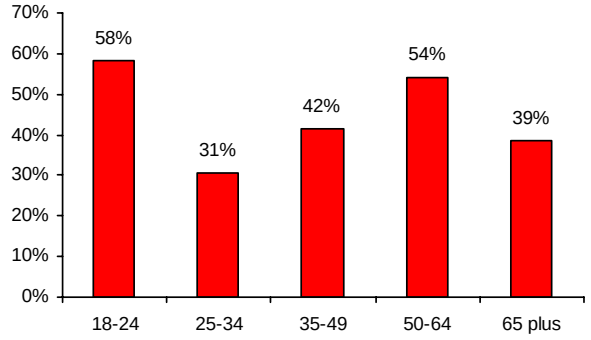


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Respondents who were significantly more likely to drink recycled water were in the 18-24 years or 50-64 years age groups.

Those who were significantly less likely to drink recycled water were in the 25-34 years age group.

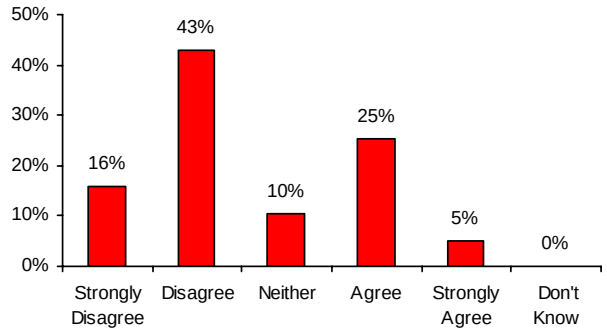
Figure 5a Use recycled water for drinking – Yes% by Age group



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The use of higher water prices to curb domestic usage was not supported by the respondents, the majority of whom either *disagreed* (43%) or *strongly disagreed* (16%) with the statement. Less than one-third of respondents *agreed* (25%) or *strongly agreed* (5%), while one in ten respondents (10%) *neither disagreed nor agreed*.

Figure 6 The main thing that would encourage me to use less water is a higher price



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Overall the statement recorded a mean agreement score of 2.6 (i.e. between 2.0 *disagree* and 3.0 *neither*). This response suggests that, on the whole, respondents believed that higher water prices would not encourage them to use less water.

The lack of support for increasing prices as a mechanism to reduce water consumption was also reflected in the *Who Cares about the Environment in 2003?* survey[5]. Out of six suggested strategies designed to make reducing water use easier, *higher water prices* was the least favoured.

Support for nuclear energy

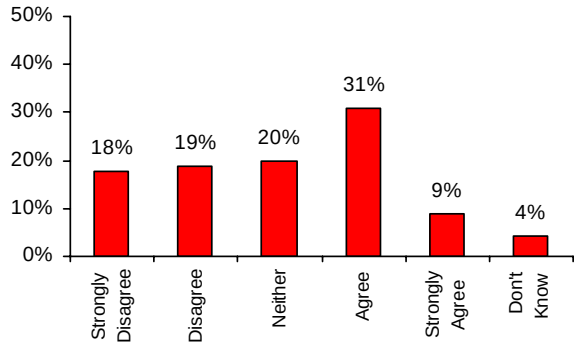
In December 2006 a draft report on the future of uranium mining and nuclear energy in Australia was released by the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet[6]. One of the scenarios contained within the report suggested that by 2050, 25 nuclear reactors could be operating in Australia, generating over one-third of the nation's electricity and reducing national greenhouse gas emissions by 18 per cent.

An Ipsos Mackay National Omnibus Poll[7], conducted in June 2006, indicated that 40 per cent of respondents were in favour of Australia using nuclear power to generate electricity. The groups most in favour were male, or those people aged 50 years or older. Respondents in the 18-29 years age group, or who were female, presented the highest level of opposition.

Hunter residents' opinions were divided on the acceptability of nuclear energy as an alternative to coal-based energy for Australia.

A slight majority of respondents either *agreed* (31%) or *strongly agreed* (9%) that nuclear energy was acceptable, while a similar, but slightly lower, proportion *disagreed* (19%) or *strongly disagreed* (18%). One-fifth of respondents (20%) stated that they *neither disagreed nor agreed* with the statement.

Figure 7 Nuclear energy is an acceptable alternative to coal-based energy for Australia



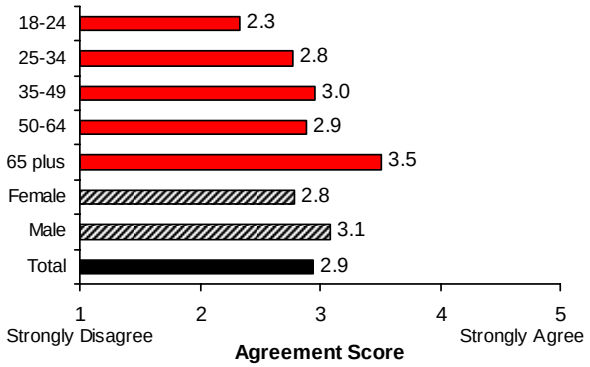
SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Overall the statement recorded a mean agreement score of 2.9 (i.e. closest to 3.0 *neither*). This "neutral" response suggests that on the whole opinions were relatively polarised on the acceptability of nuclear energy as an alternative to coal.

Similarly to results from the national survey, Hunter respondents who were significantly more likely to agree that nuclear energy is acceptable were male, or in the 65+ years age group.

Respondents who were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement were female or in the 18-24 years age group.

Figure 7a Nuclear energy is an acceptable alternative to coal-based energy for Australia - Mean Score by Age and by Gender



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Support for the coal industry

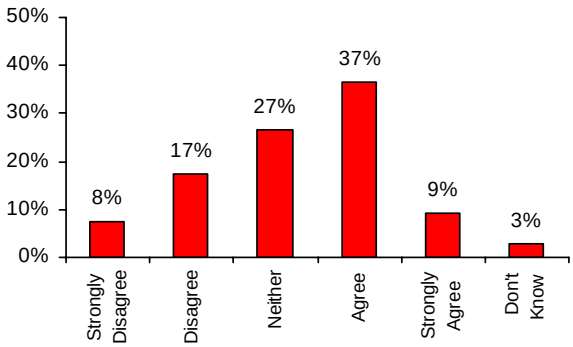
The coal industry has had a long and continuing association with the Hunter Region since the settlement of the area around Newcastle by Europeans, through to the present day where the industry is a major regional economic influence.

During 2006 there was debate within the Hunter Region in regard to the potential impacts of a number of proposed coal mines, in particular the Anvil Hill Project in the Muswellbrook Local Government Area. The debate generated a significant amount of media and political coverage during the year. The profile of climate change as an important environmental issue and its connection to the coal industry would also have had an impact on the public's opinion on this issue.

The largest proportion of respondents either *agreed* (37%) or *strongly agreed* (9%) that the benefits of the coal industry for the Hunter Region outweighed the negative impacts.

Just over one-quarter of respondents (27%) *neither disagreed nor agreed,* while a further one-quarter *disagreed,* (17%) or *strongly disagreed* (8%) with the statement.

Figure 8 The benefits of the coal industry for our Region outweigh the negative impacts

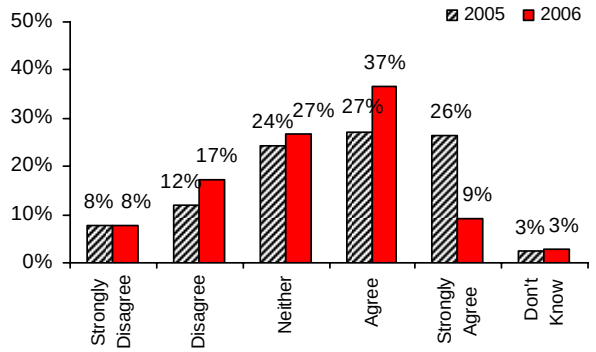


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 3.2 (i.e. on the *agree* side of *neither*) suggesting that, on balance, Hunter residents were moderately supportive of the coal industry but, again, there was some polarisation in the responses.

Compared with the results from the 2005 HVRF Omnibus Survey[2], the overall strength of agreement with the statement has decreased. The largest decrease was for the proportion of respondents who *strongly agreed* with the statement (26% to 9%), while increases were recorded for *agree (27% to 37%)*, *disagree* (12% to 17%) and *neither* (24% to 27%) responses. Interestingly, the proportion of *strongly disagree* responses remained static between the two surveys (8%).

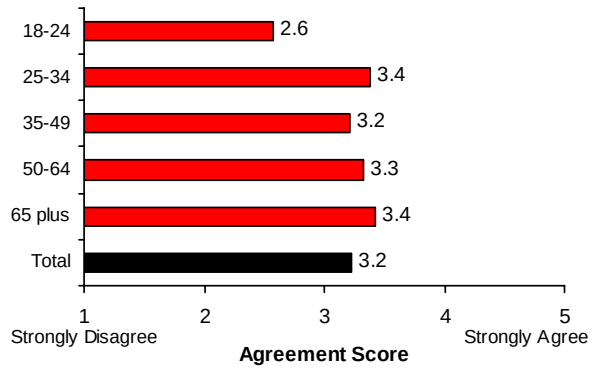
Figure 8a The benefits of the coal industry for our Region outweigh the negative impacts – 2005 v 2006



SOURCE: HVRF, 2005 & 2006

Respondents from the 18-24 years age group were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement than respondents from other age groups.

Figure 8b The benefits of the coal industry for our Region outweigh the negative impacts – Mean Score by Age group



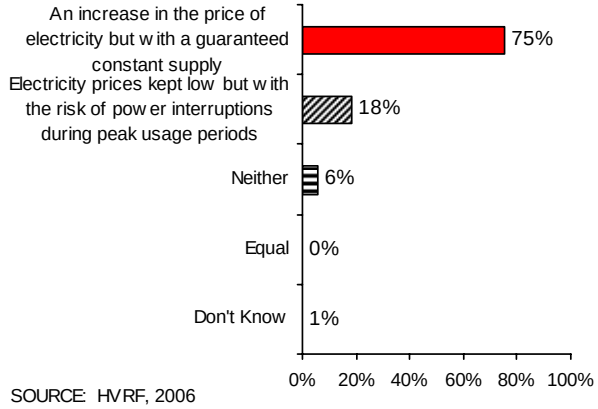
SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Managing future electricity demands

The National Electricity Market Management Company Limited's (NEMMCO) *Statement of Opportunities 2006*[7] reports that, without additional electricity generation capacity being made available to the market, the reliability of electricity supply could be expected to fall below the reliability standard in NSW by the summer of 2010-11.

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred option for managing future demand for electricity from two scenarios presented to them. Three-quarters of the respondents (75%) preferred an increase in the price of electricity but with a guaranteed constant supply, while less than one-fifth (18%) preferred to have prices kept low but with the risk of power interruptions during peak usage periods. Six per cent of respondents stated that they preferred neither of the options presented.

Figure 9 Preferred option for managing future demand for electricity



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

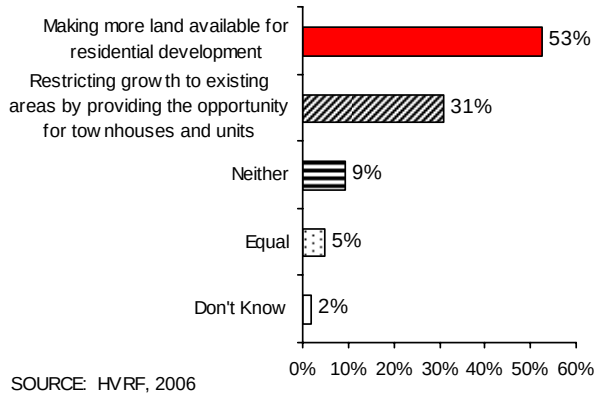
Managing future residential growth

The NSW Department of Planning's *Lower Hunter Regional Strategy*[8] states that 115,000 new dwellings and an additional 160,000 residents are planned for the Lower Hunter Region (comprising the Local Government Areas of Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Cessnock, Maitland and Port Stephens) by 2031. The Strategy plans for 60 per cent of the new dwellings to be constructed in new land release areas and 40 per cent in existing urban areas.

Respondents were asked to indicate their preferred option for managing future residential growth in their local area from two scenarios presented to them. Slightly more than half (53%) preferred to have more land made available for residential development, while just under one-third (31%) preferred to have residential growth restricted to existing areas by providing the opportunity for townhouses and units.

Almost 10 per cent of respondents stated that they preferred neither option, and a further 5 per cent preferred an even balance of both options.

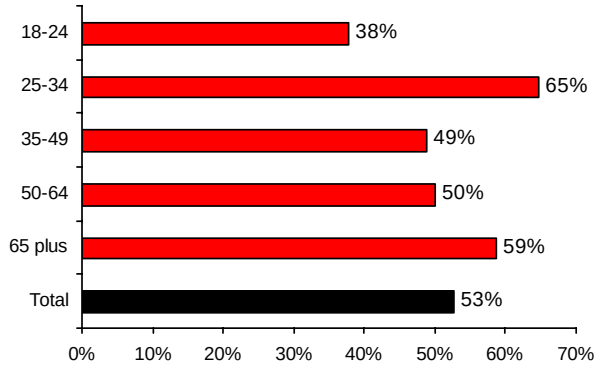
Figure 10 Preferred option for managing future residential growth



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

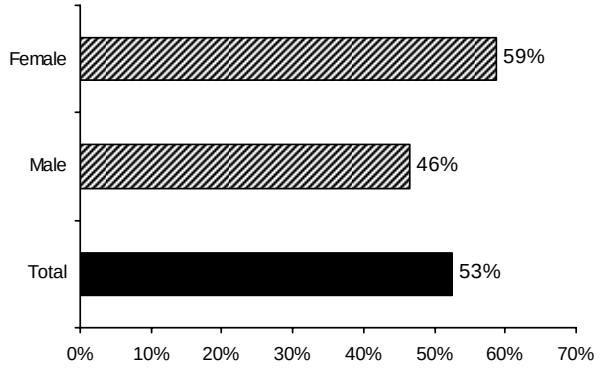
Respondents who were significantly more likely to want more land made available for residential development were female, or in the 25-34 years age group.

Figure 10a Making more land available for residential development % by Age group



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Figure 10b Making more land available for residential development % by Gender



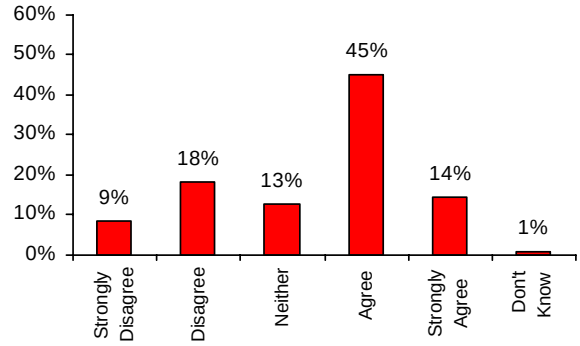
SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

Paying more to protect the environment

Respondents were asked to rate two statements to assess their acceptance of the concept of paying more to help protect the environment.

Slightly more than half of the respondents either *agreed* (45%) or *strongly agreed* (14%) that they would pay increased taxes if the extra money was used to fix environmental problems. Slightly more than one quarter of respondents *disagreed* (18%) or *strongly disagreed* (9%) with the statement.

Figure 11 I would agree to increased taxes if extra money was used to fix environmental problems

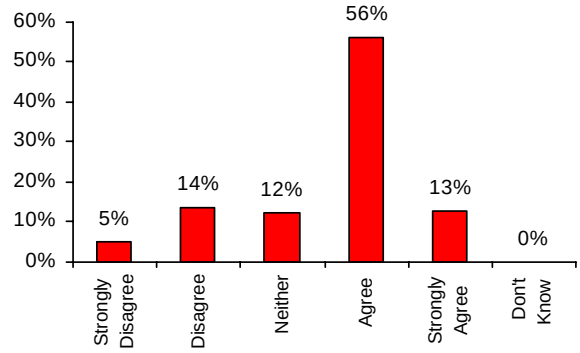


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 3.4 (i.e. on the *agree* side of *neither*). This slightly positive response suggests that Hunter residents were moderately supportive of increasing taxes in order to fix environmental problems.

More than two-thirds of respondents either *agreed* (56%) or *strongly agreed* (13%) that they would contribute financially to conservation organisations if asked. Less than one-fifth of respondents either *disagreed* (14%) or *strongly disagreed* (5%) with the statement.

Figure 12 If asked I would contribute money to conservation organisations that work to improve the environment



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

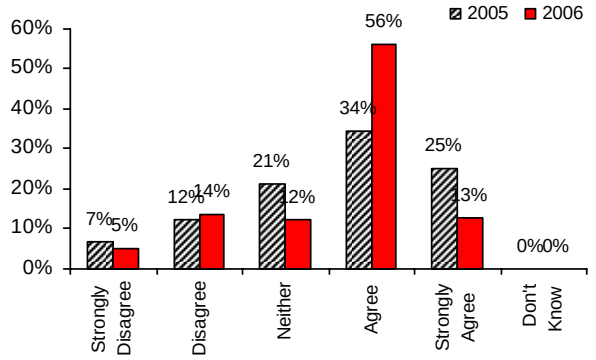
The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 3.6 (i.e. closest to *agree*), which suggests that Hunter residents would donate to conservation organisations if asked.

The respondents were also slightly more likely to prefer to donate to a conservation organisation (3.6 mean agreement score) than to pay increased taxes (3.4).

Comparing the results for this statement with those recorded in the 2005 HVRF Omnibus Survey[2], the largest increase was for the proportion of respondents who *agreed* to contribute to conservation organisations, which increased from 34 to 56 per cent.

However, while there was a decrease in the proportion of *neither disagree nor agree* responses from 21 to 12 per cent, there was also a relatively large drop in the proportion of *strongly agree* responses from 25 to 13 per cent between the two surveys.

Figure 12a If asked I would contribute money to conservation organisations that work to improve the environment – 2005 vs 2006



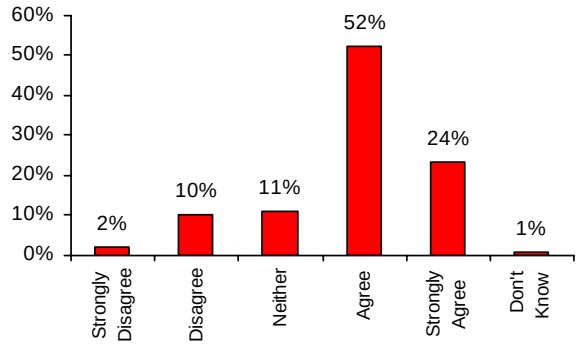
SOURCE: HVRF, 2005 & 2006

The results for the two statements regarding paying more to protect the environment suggest that the majority of Hunter residents would either agree to increased taxes, or would contribute money to conservation organisations. However, research from the Australian Bureau of Statistics[9] indicates that the proportion of NSW residents who actually donate their time or money to environmental protection has remained relatively static at approximately 20 per cent for the three surveys since 1998.

Paying more for Green Power

Given that the majority of respondents agreed that climate change would directly impact on their lives, and that the actions of the average person could help slow climate change, it is not surprising that approximately three-quarters of respondents either *agreed* (52%) or *strongly agreed* (24%) that they would be prepared to pay more for electricity if it was generated from renewable sources such as solar or wind, also known as *Green Power*.

Figure 13 I would be prepared to pay more for electricity if it was generated from renewable sources such as solar or wind



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 3.9 (i.e. closest to *Agree*) which suggests that Hunter residents are supportive of *Green Power* schemes.

Though the majority of respondents indicated that they were prepared to pay more for electricity generated by renewable sources, this attitude does not appear to have carried through to the actual residential uptake of *Green Power* programs. While figures for the Hunter Region are not directly available, according to the *National GreenPower Accreditation Program Audit 2005*[10], there were only 34,275 residential customers participating in some form of *Green Power* scheme across the whole of NSW, which was much less than for both Victoria (80,977) and Queensland (64,681).

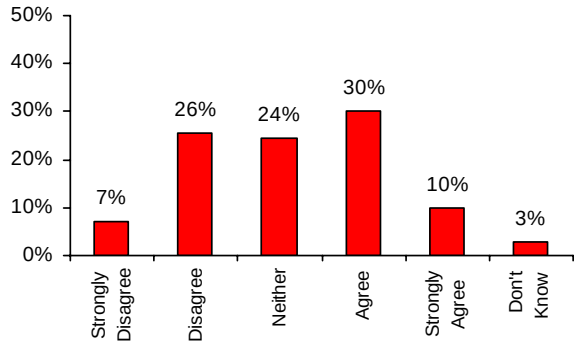
Solving environmental problems

The environmental slogan of the four R's "*refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle*" (some suggest a fifth R, "*rethink*"), is often used to encourage the community to change their behaviours to be more environmentally sensitive. Alternatively, the promotion of *Green Power* schemes could be interpreted as encouraging the idea that new technologies can be used to reduce greenhouse gas emissions without people having to alter their level of energy consumption and, therefore, their lifestyle.

When asked whether they felt that improvements in technology will do more to solve environmental problems than people making changes to their lifestyle, the largest proportion of respondents either *agreed* (30%) or *strongly agreed* (10%).

One-third of respondents *disagreed* (26%) or *strongly disagreed* (7%), and almost one-quarter of respondents (24%) *neither disagreed nor agreed* with the statement.

Figure 14 Improvements in technology will do more to solve environmental problems than people making changes to their lifestyle

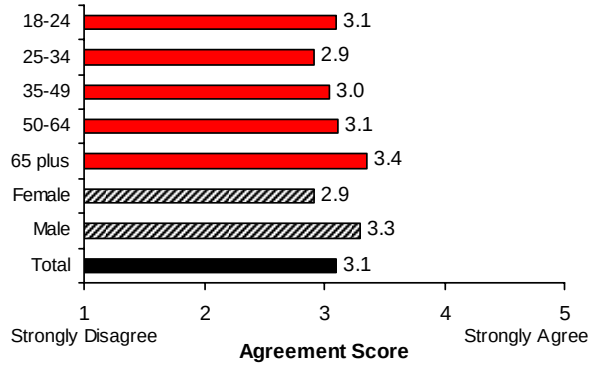


SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

The statement recorded a mean agreement score of 3.1 (i.e. closest to *neither*) suggesting that opinions were relatively polarised on whether improved technology would be more effective in solving environmental problems than people making changes to their lifestyles.

Respondents who were significantly more likely to agree were male, or in the 65+ years age group.

Figure 14a Improvements in technology will do more to solve environmental problems than people making changes to their lifestyle - Mean Score by Age and by Gender



SOURCE: HVRF, 2006

It is important to consider that the respondents who agreed that technological improvements will do more to solve environmental problems may have done so for widely differing reasons. Some may have agreed because they actually believe that technology-based solutions are more effective, while other respondents may have done so because they believe that getting people to change their behaviours is too difficult.

Survey Demographics

Gender	No.	%
Female	159	51
Male	151	49
Total	310	100

Age Group	No.	%
18-24	36	12
25-34	53	17
35-49	89	29
50-64	69	22
65 plus	62	20
Total	310	100

Employment Status	No.	%
Employed	184	59
Not employed	126	41
Total	310	100

Which Council area do you live in?	No.	%
Lake Macquarie	88	28
Newcastle	76	25
Port Stephens	37	12
Maitland	29	10
Cessnock	26	9
Upper Hunter	16	5
Great Lakes	15	5
Singleton	10	3
Gloucester	5	2
Muswellbrook	5	2
Dungog	2	1
Total	310	100

Abbreviations

ABS = Australian Bureau of Statistics
ANOVA = Analysis of variance
CATI = Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing
HVRF = The Hunter Valley Research Foundation
NEMMCO = National Electricity Market Management Company
NSW = New South Wales

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