

Preserving the Planet

Media Coverage of the Environment During 1989

How have the media covered the environmental debate? To find out we analyzed all stories on the environment that appeared on the television network evening newscasts and in the weekly news magazines during 1989. We examined 595 news items, including 453 stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news with a cumulative airtime of 13 hours 44 minutes, and 142 articles in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *U.S. News and World Report*.

Major findings:

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■ **Lube Tube** -- Oil spills generated nearly half (47%) of TV's environmental stories, but only 18% of the news magazine articles.

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■ **Blaming Business** -- Business was blamed for environmental problems more than three times as often as anyone else. Ratings of business's handling of environmental issues were 82% negative.

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■ **Crisis Coverage** -- 40% of sources said environmental problems had reached a crisis; none expressed doubt that a crisis was coming.

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■ **Green News** -- The Natural Resource Defense Council was the most frequently cited environmental group overall. But the Wilderness Society showed up most often on TV news.

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■ **Featured Creatures** -- Otters were mentioned almost twice as often as any other animal, followed by shellfish, whales, seals and eagles.

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■ **Earthy Humor** -- Late night TV comedians made environmental threats the leading source of topical humor in 1989. Exxon was the target of more jokes than George Bush or Dan Quayle.

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The Whole Earth

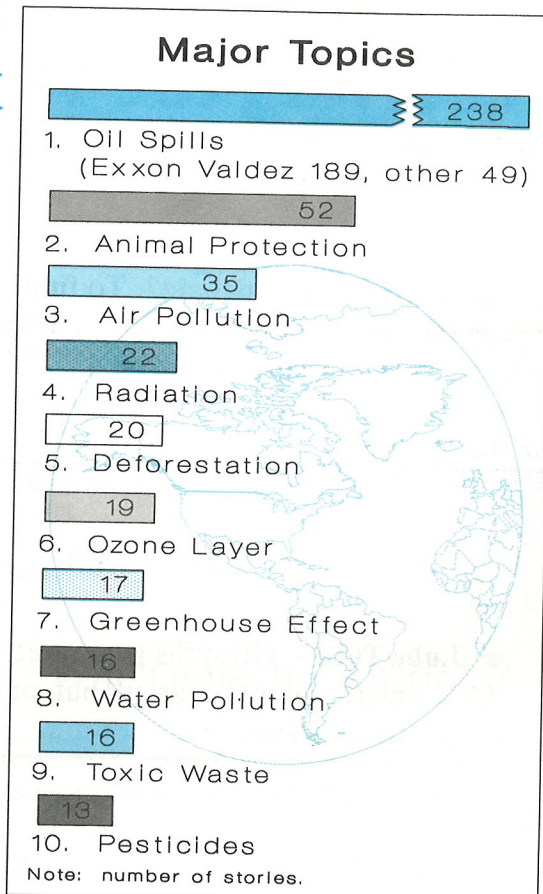
To determine how the national media cover environmental news, we analyzed all stories on the television network evening news shows and in the major weekly news magazines during 1989. There was considerable variation in the amount of coverage at the different outlets. Among the networks, NBC devoted an hour more airtime than CBS did to environmental news [4 hours 58 minutes vs. 3 hours 57 minutes]. ABC finished just behind NBC with 4 hours 49 minutes. There was less difference in the number of stories. ABC ran 160, NBC 156, and CBS 137, bringing the total to 453 stories with a cumulative airtime of 13 hours 44 minutes.

Among the news magazines, *Time* made an institutional commitment to environmental news that included a New Year's cover story on the earth as its "Planet of the Year". This was reflected in Time's heavy coverage of environmental news - 73 stories, more than Newsweek [34] and U.S. News [35] combined. News magazine coverage totaled 3458 column inches, the equivalent of a magazine column running nearly the length of a football field [96 yards].

The Planet's Problems

For each story, we noted the topic that provided the primary focus of the report. Despite a wide variety of story topics that ranged from overpopulation to littering, oil spills formed the centerpiece of environmental news in 1989. This was particularly true for television, where oil spills provided the major focus for nearly half [47%] of all environmental stories. By contrast, they were the key focus of only 18% of news magazine stories. This topic was of particular interest to *Time*, which ran fifteen stories, compared to ten in *Newsweek* and *U.S. News* combined. The top ten topics:

1. There were more stories on oil spills (238) than on the next ten most heavily covered topics



combined, including 189 stories devoted to the Exxon Valdez spill alone. Even if the Alaska spill had not occurred, other oil spills would have been the second most heavily covered environmental story of 1989.

2. After oil spills, the most coverage went to **animal protection** [52 stories], including the plight of endangered species, the illegal killing of African elephants for their ivory tusks, and the over-harvesting of whales by hunters.

3. **Air pollution** [35 stories] focused on controversy over the Clean Air Act of 1989, along with continued concern over smog in such cities as Phoenix and Los Angeles.

4. Threats from **radiation** [22 stories] dealt with the leakage of radiation from nuclear weapons plants, commercial nuclear reactors, and nuclear powered satellites.

5. News of **deforestation** [20 stories] often focused on the destruction of Brazilian rain forests.

6. Reports on the **ozone layer** [19 stories] dealt with the worries of scientists that a hole in the atmosphere's ozone layer will allow damaging radiation from the sun to reach Earth.

7. Coverage of the **greenhouse effect** [17 stories] dealt with arguments that a potential warming of the earth's climate is resulting from increased amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.

8. **Water pollution** [16 stories] included pollution of lakes, aquifers, rivers, and oceans by substances other than oil. This category also included news about the depletion of reservoirs and lakes and resulting water shortages.

9. News on **toxic waste** [16 stories] included problems of storing and disposing of toxic substances, and of cleaning up old dumpsites.

10. Reports on **pesticides and herbicides** [13 stories] discussed the associated risks of contaminating food, wildlife, and the natural environment.

A Stinking Mess

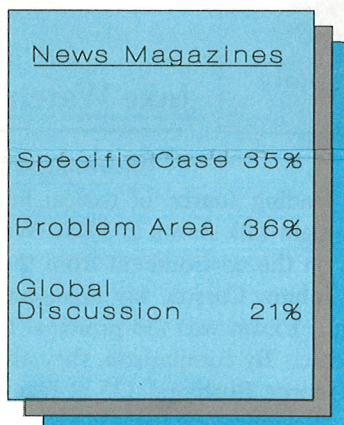
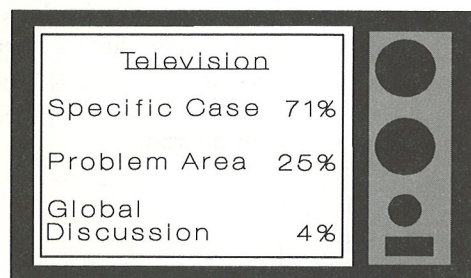
-Time headline
January 2, 1989

Levels of News

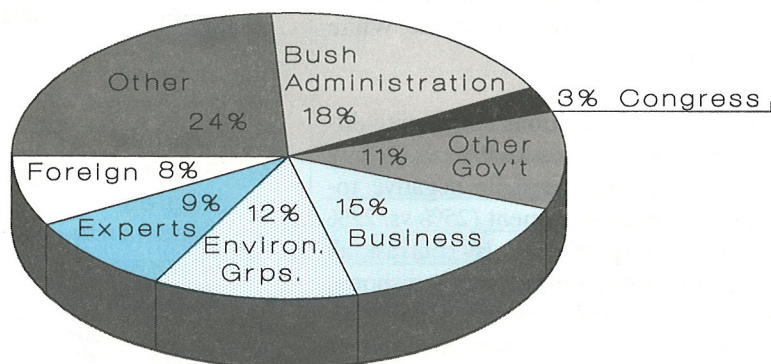
Not all environmental news was event driven. More than one third of the news stories [38%] transcended specific events to deal with general problem areas, e.g., dangers posed by low-level radiation, rather than an accident at a particular nuclear plant. In fact, one story in twelve [8%] was global in scope, dealing with a wide range of problems or general threats to "the environment".

Television news stuck to specific cases much more often than the news magazines. In fact, television dealt with particular instances proportionately twice as often as the magazines, whereas the print outlets were five times as likely to address global issues as was television. This sharp difference illustrates the more concrete focus of television on specific events accompanied by pictures.

Level of Discussion



Sources



Environmental Groups

Natural Resource Defense Council	21
Wilderness Society	17
Audubon Society	16
Environmental Defense Fund	13
Sierra Club	12
Greenpeace	8
World Wildlife Fund	7

Quotes

21
17
16
13
12
8
7

Voices on the Wilderness

Information and opinion was provided by a wide range of sources, from administration officials to citizens affected by industrial accidents. Overall government officials constituted nearly one third [32%] of all sources, including 18% from the federal executive branch alone. Other major sources included business [15%], environmental groups [12%], various "experts" [9%], and foreign sources [8%].

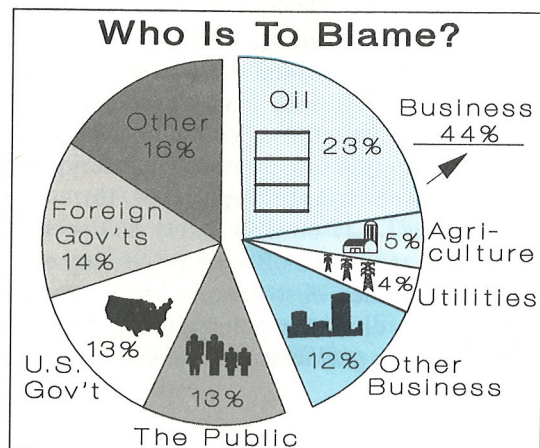
Let Earth Have Its Day

-Time headline
December 18, 1989

No one group spoke for the environmental movement. A variety of groups were frequently quoted, led by the Natural Resource Defense Council, Wilderness Society, Audubon Society, Environmental Defense Fund, and Sierra Club. Some groups made their media presence felt almost entirely on television, e.g., The Wilderness Society [15 of 17 citations] and Greenpeace [6 of 8]. By contrast, The World Wildlife Fund was quoted seven times in news magazines but never on television news. In keeping with its environmentalist orientation, *Time* quoted members of environmental groups almost as often [65 times] as the other two news magazines combined [73 quotes]. By contrast, the three television networks cited environmentalists with roughly equal frequency.

Laying Blame

Who is to blame for creating all these environmental problems? The leading miscreant in media reports was the business commu-



Get Going Mr. Bush

-Time headline
December 18, 1989

nity. Business or corporations were cited for creating environmental problems more than three times as often as any other actor. In fact, business accounted for almost half (44%) of the 224 assessments of blame in the study. Not surprisingly, the oil industry accounted for a majority of the business community's citations - 23% in all. Even without the contribution of the petroleum industry's spills and off-shore drilling, however, other industries -- led by agriculture and the electric utilities -- were collectively blamed more often than any other major actor.

For example, in a November 2 story on the need to recycle newspapers, ABC's Ned Potter concluded, "Who really has the power to solve the newspaper glut? Environmental groups say newspaper publishers. . . . But so far, the groups complain, they've been slow about it." This story also illustrates the principal-sources of blame. Reporters themselves targeted the responsible parties in a majority of cases. Among sources, environmentalists most often assessed blame -- more than one charge in five, excluding those levelled by reporters.

Among the remaining targets of criticism, blame was distributed about evenly among the

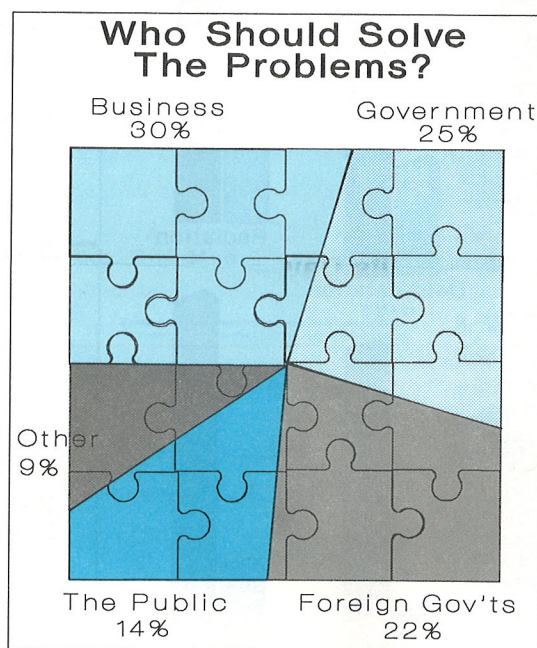
federal government (13%), foreign governments (14%), and the general public (13%). Criticisms of the public played Pogo's refrain, "We have met the enemy and it is us." For example, *U.S. News* (10/2) quoted anthropologist Richard Leakey, "The only reason elephants are dying now is that Tom, Dick and Harry want to wear baubles and trinkets made of ivory."

Looking for Answers

Opinions about who should solve environmental problems were more evenly divided than assessments of who bears responsibility for them. Although business once again took the lead with 30% of all mentions, it was followed more closely by the federal government (25%), foreign governments (22%), and the public at large (14%). Thus, for example, where Richard Leakey blamed the public for the elephants' plight, a CBS story directed the search for solutions to the federal government. On February 16, Dan Rather reported that, "A coalition of wildlife groups today asked the U.S. government to take urgent action to save the African elephant. . . to ban imports of ivory and to declare the elephant an endangered species."

Problems which business was most often expected to solve included oil spills, air pollution, acid rain, toxic waste and other pesticide-related matters. Problems for which government solutions were mentioned most often included off-shore oil drilling, water pollution, the greenhouse effect and threats from radiation. Foreign governments were called upon most often to combat deforestation, protect endangered species, and overcome such challenges as ozone depletion and overpopulation.

Whether business or government was asked to help depended greatly on the type of source being quoted. Reporters, environmentalists, and Democrats mentioned government more often than business as a source of solutions for environmental problems. Industry



sources and members of the Bush administration cited business more often than government. Within the Bush administration, however, representatives of environmental agencies such as the EPA and OSHA looked to business and government with about equal frequency.

Scoreboard

Beyond assessing responsibility for creating or solving environmental problems, we noted every evaluation of how individuals, groups, or nations handled environmental issues. Nearly 80% of the 423 evaluations were directed at either business or government. The vast majority of these were negative.

Evaluations of business ran more than 4 to 1 negative, including a 3 to 1 margin on television

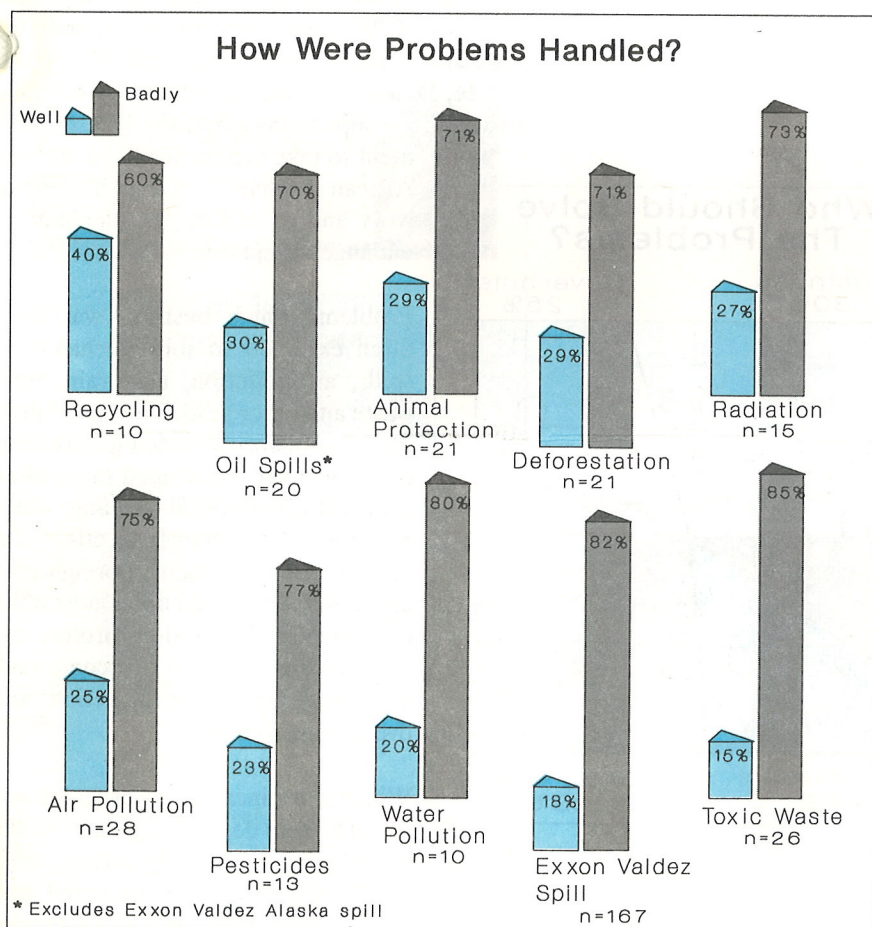
Positive Ratings (%)			
Business		Government	
ABC	21%	ABC	48%
CBS	17%	CBS	48%
NBC	14%	NBC	30%
<i>Time</i>	24%	<i>Time</i>	38%
<i>Newsweek</i>	28%	<i>Newsweek</i>	20%
<i>U.S. News</i>	25%	<i>U.S. News</i>	8%
Total	18%	Total	28%
	n=202		n=134

Note: percent of positive assessments.

and 5 to 1 at the news magazines. There was little variation across news organizations, with positive assessments ranging from a low of 14% at NBC to a high of 28% at *Newsweek*. For example, a *Newsweek* reporter called the Exxon Valdez oil spill "an accident that, through mind-boggling ineptitude, went from serious to catastrophic." (4/10) And on CBS (2/11), an opponent of offshore oil drilling complained, "the destruction of a myriad species...in order for a few already too rich white men to get richer is not going to happen here!"

Most of the positive judgments of business were expressed either by corporate spokesmen or members of the Bush administration. The praise also tended to be milder than the condemnations. For example, CBS's Wyatt Andrews reported on the Alaskan spill, "(Transportation Secretary) Skinner actually defended Exxon, saying the company wasn't organized until Monday but was running things well now." (3/30) Although the Exxon Valdez spill attracted the most criticism, business fared no better in its ratings on other environmental issues. Evaluations of Exxon's role in the Alaskan spill were 82% negative, the same rating accorded to business across all other environmental issues.

The media also turned thumbs down on government efforts to deal with environmental issues, although the marks were not as low as those handed out to business. The ratings spread across news organizations was also much greater. Among the networks, opinion on government's role was almost evenly divided at ABC (48% positive vs. 52% negative) but 4 to 1 negative (21% positive) at CBS. At the news magazines, evaluations ranged from a high of 38% positive at *Time* to a mere 8% positive (a 12 to 1 negative ratio) at *U.S. News*. For example, the October 23 *U.S. News* criticized government oversight of nuclear weapons plants: "Government officials simply ignored early warnings of dangerous pollution from surveyors and consultants..." One of the most colorful defenses of government's role came from a Bush campaign pledge rebroad-



cast on ABC (12/27): "Those who say we're powerless to do anything about the greenhouse effect are forgetting about the White House effect."

Overall these two institutions fared quite differently in print and broadcast news. News magazines were about equally negative toward business and government (25% vs. 22% positive ratings respectively). By contrast, all three networks rated government's response to environmental problems more positively than that of business. Their combined ratings were nearly twice as high for government (31% positive) as for business (17% positive).

The failing grades meted out to government and business reflected more general criticism over the handling of virtually all environmental issues. Regardless of the groups or institutions involved, the handling of virtually every issue received far more criticism than praise. Negative ratings predominated by margins ranging from 2 to 1 to 6 to 1 on such issues as oil spills, animal protection, threats from radiation, air and water pollution, pesticides, and deforestation. The worst ratings were reserved for the problems of toxic waste (only 15% positive comments). The only topic that generated more praise than criticism was recycling, a measure that was rarely evaluated.

Animal Stories

1. Otters	47		
2. Shellfish	27		
3. Whales	26		
4. Seals	24		
5. Eagles	23		
6. Elephants	19		
7. Ducks	17		
8. Sea Lions	16		
9. Bears	14		
10. Owls	12		

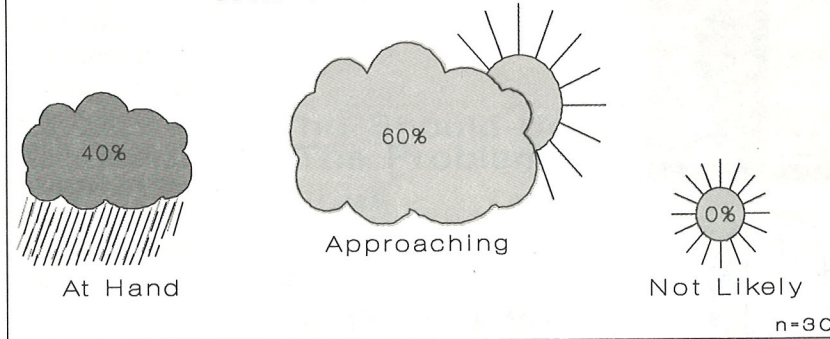
Time argued, "If the nations of the world take immediate action, the destruction of the global environment can be slowed substantially, but some irreversible damage is inevitable." Nearly a year later (12/18), *Time* reiterated, "The planet is in trouble. If nations do not take drastic action, it could one day be unfit as a human habitat."

Featured Creatures

This planet provides a habitat for many species, but some were in the news more than others. The most newsworthy animal by far was the otter, mentioned in 47 stories. Of those in the top ten, otters, shellfish, seals, eagles, and sea lions were among the creatures affected by oil spills. Whales have been a species long threatened by over-harvesting, especially by Japan.

Elephants are a more recent concern, spurred by the devastating effects of poaching.

Will There be a Crisis?



Crisis Coverage

Do our environmental difficulties constitute a crisis? Is such a crisis at hand, or is one imminent? Or are such fears overstated? This issue was resolved decisively in favor of the pessimists. Among those who raised the specter of an environmental crisis, 40% argued that the crisis was at hand, and the other 60% saw one approaching. No source or reporter raised doubts over the inevitability of a crisis.

Cries of "crisis!" were often accompanied by calls for action. For example, on January 2,

Environmental issues were the leading source of topical humor on TV's late-night talk shows in 1989. We logged 192 jokes on the environment from the monologues of Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman. Exxon was the principal target of their ridicule. By comparison, they aimed 143 jokes at George Bush and 135 at Dan Quayle. Samples: "Scientists say there is a big black ring around (Neptune). That means Exxon must have been there." (Leno, 8/4) "They started spraying malathion last night, and the air quality in L.A. improved dramatically." (Carson, 11/6) "Exxon has now abruptly stopped its Alaskan cleanup. Gee, wouldn't it be too bad if Americans abruptly stopped buying Exxon gas?" (Letterman, 9/8)

Joke Watch