

Popular commitment to protecting the rainforests

Research briefing for The Prince's Rainforests Project Steering Group

This briefing note summarises the key findings from research conducted for The Prince's Rainforests Project in April 2008, with a nationally representative sample of 1,000 people in each of the UK, U.S., Germany and France. The research showed that people are:

Informed about rainforests and their link to climate change. They recognise rainforest destruction as one of the major sources of greenhouse gas emissions and see preserving rainforests as second only to renewable energy in its practical potential for reducing the rate of climate change. They also highlight absorbing carbon dioxide as the most important benefit that rainforests have on our environment. Despite this level of understanding, people are...

Shocked by the rate of rainforest destruction. Within messages we tested about the value and dangers associated with the rainforests, the phrases with the most impact were those that tell how quickly destruction is happening. These phrases triggered a mix of fear, despair and anger.

Motivated to help fix the problem. Personal commitment to help fight climate change is rising fast, but in a pessimistic context in which few people believe we will succeed. As a result people are...

Looking for leadership to achieve it. People consistently see NGOs and individuals like themselves as playing the major roles in reducing climate change today, while they believe that it is governments and businesses that should play the bigger roles. A majority in every country would like their government to take the lead.

Potentially willing to pay for it once they are engaged. After exposure to the messages in our research questionnaire, two in three people in every country would be willing for their government to spend a small amount of taxpayers' money each year on preservation of rainforests.

People are...

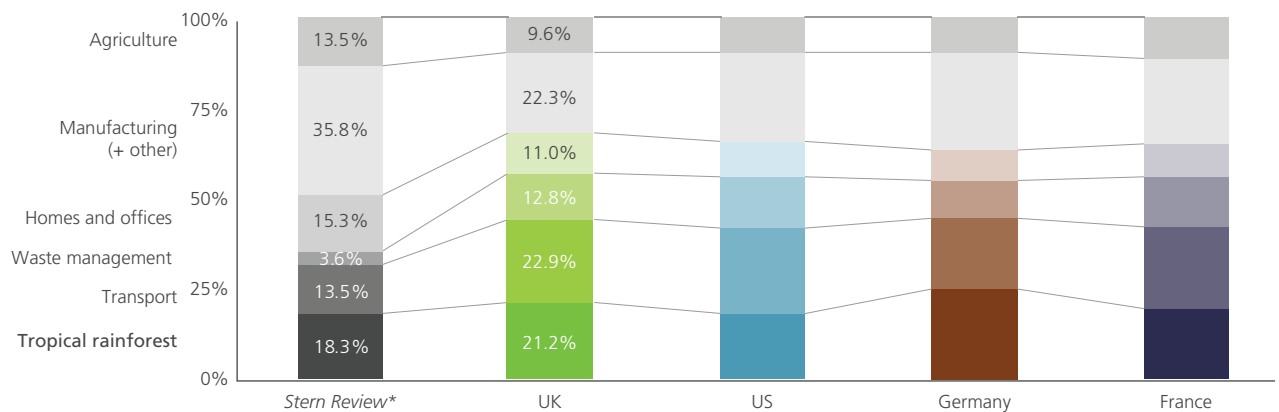
Informed

People are well informed about rainforests and their link to climate change. They recognise the importance of the link from both ends.

When describing climate change, they give prominence to the impact of rainforests. In each of the four countries researched (the UK, U.S., Germany and France), preserving rainforests was ranked second in practical potential for reducing the rate of climate change – above limiting country carbon emissions, curbing air travel, better building design, and carbon taxes, and second only to renewable energy. Asked to estimate the contribution that tropical rainforests and other areas made to greenhouse gas emissions, people were surprisingly accurate (figure 1). Germany recognised tropical rainforests as making a greater contribution than transport.

Figure 1: People recognise tropical rainforests' contribution to greenhouse gas emissions

What percentage contribution does each of the following have on greenhouse gas emissions?

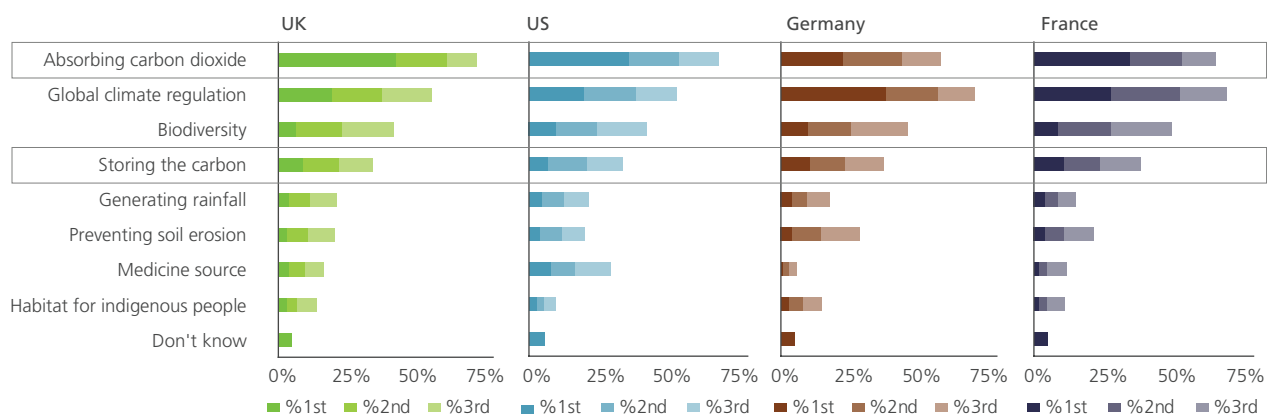


* Derived from World CHG Emissions Flow Chart from the World Resources Institute. The Stern Review, 2006, p199

Equally, when describing rainforests, people give prominence to the impact on climate change. In each of the four countries researched, absorbing carbon dioxide was ranked as the most important benefit that rainforests have on our environment, with global climate regulation second – both substantially above biodiversity and other aspects of the forests (figure 2). (Interestingly the rainforests' role in storing carbon, vs. absorbing CO₂, is less well recognised. Participants were quick to understand, but had not previously thought of, the 'double whammy' of releasing the stored carbon, as well as losing the capacity to absorb carbon, when rainforests are destroyed.)

Figure 2: People see CO₂ reduction as the strongest benefit of the rainforests

Which three are the most important benefits our rainforests have on our environment?



People are...

Shocked

What shocks people is the rate at which rainforests are being destroyed. We tested reactions to four different messages about the value and dangers associated with the rainforests. Within each, the phrases that most grabbed people's attention were those that tell how quickly destruction is happening – more than the metaphors we used to describe the rainforests' value (which, as seen earlier, is already well understood). Overall, the emotions these messages triggered were a mix of fear, despair and anger.

In the message text below (figure 3), more than 50% of people were grabbed most by the idea that we have destroyed half of the world's rainforests in the last 50 years, compared with 20% who were grabbed most by the idea of the rainforests containing two thirds of the world's species, and even fewer by the idea that 25% of our medicines are sourced there.

Figure 3: What shocks people most is how quickly the rainforest destruction is happening

“Rainforests are one of the world's oldest living ecosystems and home to millions of the poorest people. They contain **two thirds of the world's animal and plant species**, from which **25% of our everyday medicines** are sourced. When they are gone, they will be gone forever, yet in the **last 50 years we have destroyed half of the world's rainforests.**”

Size of bubble = degree to which each bold phrase grabs people's attention

Motivated

People are motivated to help fix the problem. A year ago people's personal commitment to fight climate change was limited, both by confusion about what to do, and by a significant degree of scepticism. Over the last year personal commitment has risen rapidly, in both the UK and U.S. (Table 1). Yet despite this rise in commitment, people are still highly pessimistic. Only around 5% believe that 'we will stop climate change', and scarcely more believe that 'the people and organisations who should be doing something about climate change are doing what is needed' – which explains why they are looking for leadership.

Table 1: Change in personal commitment to fight climate change and belief in ultimate success, UK and U.S.

Proportion agreeing (scoring 6-7 on 1-7 scale of agreement)	UK		US	
	2007	2008	2007	2008
Commitment <i>'I am personally making a significant effort to help reduce climate change through how I live my life today'</i>	15%	25%	13%	22%
Outcome <i>'I believe we will stop climate change'</i>	6%	4%	9%	7%

Source for 2007 figures: Consumers, Brands and Climate Change, Lippincott, The Climate Group and Sky

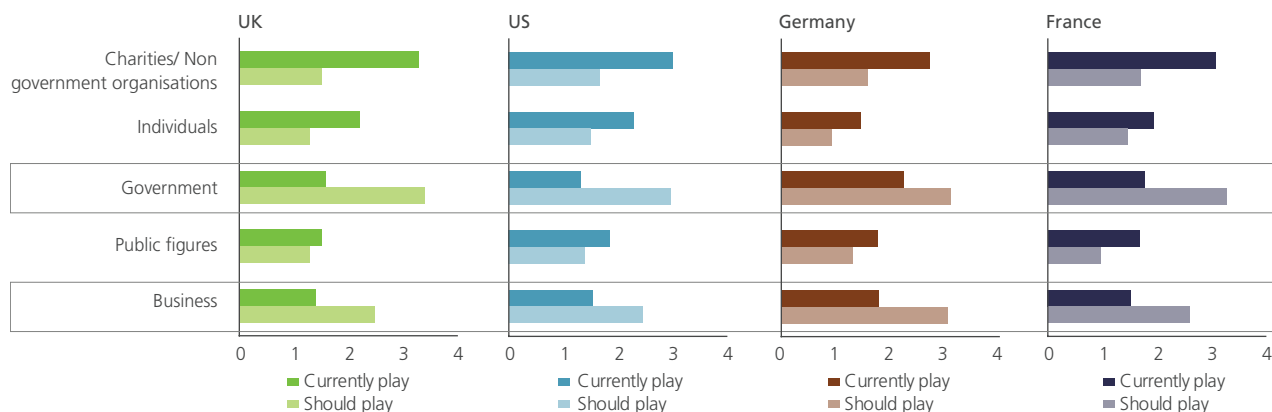
People are...

Looking for leadership

People consistently see NGOs and individuals like themselves as playing the major roles in reducing climate change today, whereas it is governments and businesses that they believe should be taking the lead (Figure 4).

Figure 4: People are looking to government and business for leadership

Which groups are *currently* playing a major role in helping to reduce climate change?
Which groups *should* play a major role in helping to reduce climate change?



*1st = 4pts, 2nd = 3pts, 3rd = 2pts, 4th = 1pt

To put people's personal commitment in perspective: about a third of people (more in France) are 'ready to do more than the basics to really make a difference'; slightly fewer are prepared to 'spend extra time' to help reduce climate change; fewer still, about one in five, are prepared to 'spend extra money'; but a majority in every country 'would like the government to take the lead in combating climate change'.

Willing to pay

Once they are engaged, people appear willing to contribute. After exposure to the messages in our research questionnaire, two in three people in every country would be willing for their government to spend a small amount of taxpayers' money on rainforest preservation (Table 2):

Table 2: Proportion of people agreeing that 'I would be willing for my government to spend a small amount of taxpayers' money each year on preserving rainforests'

Agreement on 1-5 scale	UK	US	Germany	France
Strongly agree (5)	37%	39%	39%	35%
Agree / strongly agree (4-5)	66%	67%	68%	68%

Consistent with other research we have done in this field, the overall picture is of strong latent support, mixed with helplessness – a scepticism that is not about the problem, but about the realism of any solution. People are looking for leadership to help them achieve what they cannot do on their own. For initiatives that credibly offer that, there is a ready following.

For more information please contact:

Simon Glynn, Lippincott, simon.glynn@lippincott.com, 020 7915 9800, www.lippincott.com.