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Americans Favor Conservation, But Few Practice It

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New Haven, Conn.— Most Americans like the idea of conservation, but few practice it in their everyday lives, according to the results of a national survey released today by researchers at Yale and George Mason universities.

A majority of Americans say that it is “very important” or “somewhat important” to turn off unneeded lights (92 percent), to lower the thermostat in winter (83 percent), and to use public transportation or carpool (73 percent), among other conservation behaviors. Yet the study found that:

- 88 percent of Americans say it is important to recycle at home, but only 51 percent “often” or “always” do;
- 81 percent say it is important to use re-usable shopping bags, but only 33 percent “often” or “always” do;
- 76 percent say it is important to buy locally grown food, but only 26 percent “often” or “always” do;
- 76 percent say it is important to walk or bike instead of drive, but only 15 percent “often” or “always” do; and
- 72 percent of Americans say it is important to use public transportation or carpool, but only 10 percent say they “often” or “always” do.

“There are many possible explanations for the gap between people’s attitudes and their actual behavior,” said Anthony Leiserowitz, director of the Yale Project on Climate Change. “For example, public transportation may not be locally available or convenient. Overcoming barriers such as these will make it much easier for people to act in ways consistent with their values.”

The survey also found that approximately 33 percent of Americans in the past year rewarded companies that are taking steps to reduce global warming by buying their products, while slightly less refused buying the products of companies that they perceive to be recalcitrant on the issue. Finally, 11 percent of Americans have contacted government officials in the past year about global warming, with seven in 10 urging officials to take action to reduce it.

“When it comes to taking a stand against global warming, concerned Americans are much more likely to take action through consumer purchases rather than as citizens,” said Edward Maibach, director of the Center for Climate Change Communication at George Mason University. “This lack of citizen engagement may help to explain why Congress is being so timid in addressing climate change.”

The results come from a nationally representative survey of 1,001 American adults, age 18 and older. The sample was weighted to correspond with U.S. Census Bureau parameters. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3 percent, with 95 percent confidence. The survey was designed by researchers at Yale and George Mason universities and conducted from December 24, 2009, to January 3, 2010, by Knowledge Networks, using an online research panel of American adults.

A copy of the report is available at <http://environment.yale.edu/uploads/BehaviorJan2010.pdf>.