

Alice Ferguson Foundation
Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative
"Trash Free by 2013"



PROACT:
Potomac River Outreach and Awareness
Campaign for Trash

Public Opinion Study Results

Why People Litter in the
Potomac
River
Watershed



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Conducted by OpinionWorks Inc.

PROACT's Findings on Why People Litter in the Potomac River Watershed

Public Opinion Study Results

These are the results of this first-ever opinion study in the Potomac River Watershed which provides provocative insight into regional attitudes and opinions about trash, examines the reasons why people litter, and explores possible ways to persuade them to stop. The Alice Ferguson Foundation (AFF) with the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments, a network of government, businesses, and concerned citizens, have been developing, as part of the larger Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative, a regional anti-litter campaign. They commissioned OpinionWorks, an experienced observer of public opinion in this area, to conduct the opinion study. The study, which polled 1,000 residents throughout the four states and the District of Columbia in the Potomac River Watershed, included in-depth focus groups with chronic litterers. Results will be used to create a multi-year, large-scale regional public education and awareness program for residents, businesses, and community organizations.



The opinion study was conducted using combined funds from Arlington, Montgomery, and Prince George's Counties, the District of Columbia, and the City of Rockville, and is being used to define audiences and develop effective messaging and approaches for litterers and those able to influence them. AFF is actively reaching out to other jurisdictions and the business community to join the campaign. For more information or to find out how to become involved in PROACT, call the Foundation at (202)518-7415.

Key Findings

Finding 1 The good news is that there is a surprisingly large citizen base bothered and concerned about trash and that these citizens are ready to do something about it.

- More than one-half (56 percent) of the public in this watershed think about the amount of litter they see on the ground or in the water sometimes or often. Almost two-thirds (63 percent) are bothered "a lot" by the litter they see.
- On average, the public gives local creeks and rivers a grade of only a C+ for being clean and free of litter. The problem is so severe that one-third of the public across the watershed (31 percent) believe their own neighborhood needs an organized clean-up.
- Two-thirds (66 percent) believe the litter problem is "big enough that [they] would like to see the state and local government commit more resources to doing something about it."

Two-thirds of the public want more government resources committed to dealing with litter.

Finding 2 Littering is a widespread problem. People of all races and socio-economic groups litter. But the problem is especially acute among young men, where the numbers rise to surprising levels.

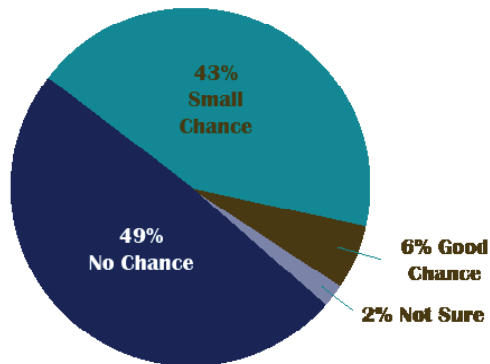
- Four people in ten (39 percent) across this watershed see someone littering sometimes or often; 20 percent know someone personally who litters; and more than 8 percent of the public—almost one person in ten—admits to littering a food wrapper, bottle, or can in the past year or two.
- Twelve percent admit to littering a cigarette butt, including 46 percent of smokers, and 33 percent have dropped partially eaten food on the ground or thrown it from a car.

- While 7 percent of all adults in the watershed admit to littering a food wrapper in the past couple of years, that number rises to 17 percent of those under age 30. Men are twice as likely as women to litter food wrappers. When you combine those factors, the numbers climb startlingly high: 25 percent of all men under age 25 litter food wrappers.
- While 3 percent of the public overall admits to littering boxes or bags of trash, 11 percent of men under 25 are willing to admit that they have tossed a box or bag of trash!

Finding 3 While litterers make clear that enforcement would deter them, very few people think there is a chance of getting caught.

- In focus groups, litterers said they often look out for police before they toss something. But when they think the coast is clear, they toss their litter.

Is a Litterer Likely to Get Caught?



- Almost no one thinks he or she will get caught littering. Only 6 percent of the public says there is “a good chance” that someone who litters will get caught and have to pay a fine. The rest of the public says there is “no chance” of getting caught (49 percent), only “a small chance” (43 percent), or they are not sure (2 percent).

Finding 4 There is a tremendous lack of knowledge about what a watershed is and what role stormwater plays in carrying trash to area waterways.

- Three-quarters (77 percent) of the public wrongly believe that litter washed down a storm drain is filtered out before it reaches local rivers and streams or they are just not sure what happens. Fewer than six in ten (58 percent) can even picture a storm drain or catch basin close to where they live.
- Among our target audience in the focus groups, it was nearly universally and wrongly thought that water from storm drains first goes to a treatment plant before being released.
- Though all of the survey respondents live within the Potomac River Watershed, more than half of them (57 percent) do not know that.



Finding 5 The most important reason people say they litter is simple “laziness” or “convenience.” Other reasons can be surprising, revealing that traditional media and messages will not reach them.

- These convenience litterers say that when they are done with a bottle, can, or food wrapper, “it’s over,” and they toss it away without a thought.
- These litterers tend to have the view that their own litter is not very serious. When they see an anti-littering message that depicts a broken bottle or a whole bag of trash being thrown, they almost uniformly say their own litter is smaller, safer, or just not that bad.
- Many litterers do not want to be around trash and toss it out the car window in an effort to keep their own vehicle pristine.

“I shouldn’t really care about littering because somebody is going to feel good about spending their Saturday cleaning it up.”

- There was some consensus in the focus groups that they would not litter in front of their own house: “At my school, at work, anywhere but in front of my house, because I don’t want people to come to my house and be like, ‘This is a mess.’ So I don’t litter in front of my house. I try to not let the kids litter in front of there either.”

- Some focus group respondents justified their littering by saying they are creating jobs: “it’s kind of necessary because it provides so many jobs for people. If we didn’t litter then there wouldn’t be trash collectors, there wouldn’t be people who work for the environmental protection and stuff like that.”
- In this case, the litterer feels that he or she is providing a pleasant Saturday activity for other people: “those community clean-up days... are fun, so I shouldn’t really care about littering because somebody is going to feel good about spending their Saturday cleaning it up... I wouldn’t care about those people picking it up because I think they are doing something they enjoy doing.”
- Among many people in the target group of litterers, there is a strong tendency to shift responsibility onto others. In both focus groups, when we showed a photo of a young girl on the beach about to step on a broken bottle in her bare feet, the consensus was that “she should be wearing beach shoes” (not “the bottle shouldn’t be there”).

Finding 6 Media that is focused and has the right message can reach confirmed litterers and make an impact on them.

- An animated campaign was a big winner in the focus groups because it used a simple message and imagery that everyone could understand (“makes our water sick”), clearly identified the behavior as wrong without being overly judgmental, and had an up-tempo feel.
- Shocking ads like the anti-tobacco “Truth” campaign clearly broke through to this demographic.



- Illustrating the path of a plastic bottle through the storm drain system out into the river—a connection none of them have ever made before—changed their thinking. A homemade Alice Ferguson Foundation video that followed a bottle from a K Street sidewalk to a trashy riverbank had a strong impact.

- Seeing a vulnerable child in a dangerous or unpleasant setting had an impact, as in the Los Angeles ad showing a little girl crouched and contemplating a cigarette butt on the beach.
- Images of rats and roaches in print ads caught the attention of some respondents.
- The use of local sports figures or music personalities would get their attention, they said.
- Ads clearly need to be relatively short (or seem so) and not too wordy to hold their attention.



Taken together, these findings provide ample opportunity to develop a compelling public education campaign. The full report is available upon request.

AFF is actively reaching out for more partners for PROACT from: jurisdictions, businesses, non-profits, foundations, agencies, and citizens. Call 202-518-7415 for more information.

OpinionWorks is a full-service opinion research organization based in Annapolis, Maryland. In addition to its core clients in the Washington/Baltimore region, they serve a variety of national clients, regional organizations, and public sector agencies across North America and in the U.K. (including *The (Baltimore) Sun*, the University of Maryland School of Medicine, Baltimore Stormwater Action Coalition, Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, National Trust for Historic Preservation, The Wilderness Society, the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, and the Maryland Citizens Health Initiative).

The Alice Ferguson Foundation

Environmental Education on the Potomac



Located minutes from the nation's capital, bordering the shores of the Potomac River, the Alice Ferguson Foundation is an environmental education organization—501(c)(3)—operating Hard Bargain Farm. It is implementing its mission to provide experiences that encourage connections between people, the natural environment, farming, and the cultural heritage of the Potomac River Watershed, leading to personal environmental responsibility, through educational programs at Hard Bargain Farm and in area national parks, an annual Potomac River Watershed Cleanup, and other community outreach programs.

Hard Bargain Farm Environmental Center

Credentialed educators using experiential learning techniques teach environmental studies for children, pre-K through 12th grades, on a 330-acre, working farm along the Potomac River. Each year, more than 10,000 students and their teachers enjoy day and overnight experiences at the farm. Thirty-eight percent of our student population is comprised of at-risk youths from the region's low-income communities in Maryland.

Bridging the Watershed

This partnership between the Alice Ferguson Foundation and the National Park Service provides “national park labs” that give field studies and service learning opportunities to urban high school students.

Teacher Institutes and Workshops

Professional development opportunities for teachers include environmental education, curricula and instruction methods, through summer institutes associated with the Hard Bargain Farm and Bridging the Watershed programs.

Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative

In 2005, the Foundation spearheaded the Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative, which commits to a trash-free Potomac by 2013. This Initiative engages government agencies, communities, private organizations, and corporations through the Annual Potomac River Watershed Cleanup, the Potomac Watershed Trash Summit, and the Potomac Watershed Trash Treaty. The Foundation believes a trash-free Potomac can become a reality with education, local governmental support, and community-based action. During the 2008 Cleanup, 12,078 volunteers collected more than 285 tons of trash, including more than 27 tons of recyclables.

Arts and Community Outreach at Hard Bargain Farm

The Amphitheater at Hard Bargain Farm is home to two annual performance series, Concert in the Woods and Theater in the Woods, and holds productions from spring into fall. Hard Bargain Farm opens its doors to the public twice a year for its annual Spring Farm Festival and Oktoberfest.

How Can I Support the “Trash Free” Program?

Please visit our award-winning, educational website at www.fergusonfoundation.org.

Donate online or learn about the benefits of supporting the Trash Free Potomac Watershed Initiative. There are many other ways you may choose to support us, including monthly gifts, planned giving, gifts of stock, or memorial gifts. We make every dollar count!



Alice Ferguson Foundation

(We participate in the Combined Federal Campaign and United Way)

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