



The State of Environmental Journalism

This is a summary of a presentation by David Sachsman at the 2008 annual conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists. Between 2000 and 2005 Sachsman, a professor at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, and other researchers called every daily newspaper and television station in the country to survey environment reporters. They compared their findings to information gathered on U.S. journalists in general in 2002.

Some key findings:

- Just 36.5 percent of newspapers and 10 percent of TV stations had environment reporters.
- Large-circulation newspapers were more likely to have environment reporters.
- Roughly half of environment reporters spend only a third of their time or less reporting on environmental issues. Only 26 percent covered the environment more than two-thirds of the time.
- Environment reporters and other journalists were similar in age, education, years in journalism and gender.
- Of the environmental reporters, 23.9 percent majored in a science in college, compared to just 2.9 percent of journalists in general.
- Three-quarters of environment reporters feel they need further training. Most commonly, they felt inadequately trained in natural science, environmental issues and journalism itself.
- Environment reporters and other journalists tend to read the same magazines and newspapers.
- Job satisfaction was roughly the same among both types of journalists.
- Environment reporters most frequently used state departments of environmental quality, local environmental groups and local individual citizen activists as sources. The least used sources were Chemical Manufacturer's Association, the National Health and Safety Council and Greenpeace. (A list of potential sources was given to reporters by the researchers.)
- Although more than three-quarters said environmental reporters need to be as objective as other journalists, roughly one-third said they should sometimes be advocates for the environment.
- More than one-third said environmental journalists tend to be too 'green.'

The authors made these broad conclusions:

- Environment reporters may have different educational backgrounds than other journalists, but they share a great number of personal and work characteristics. ***Environment reporters are journalists first.***

- Journalists share similarities, despite their age, gender, ethnicity or politics, because of the similarities in their training.
- Bigger newspapers tend to have more specialty reporters, including environment reporters. When it comes to specialized reporting, then, bigger is better.

(Reported by Andy McGlashen, MSU Knight Center for Environmental Journalism)