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Environmental Awareness of Rural Population in the Light of the Authors' Research

Abstract. High regard for the natural environment is a value which is widely accepted and declared by Polish society. However, this positive attitude toward nature does not fully correspond with actual choices of environmental values and environmentally friendly consumer behavior.

This article is an attempt to determine the environmental awareness of inhabitants of rural areas of the Chojniki powiat (county) located in the Pomeranian Voivodeship. The study was conducted in the second quarter of 2014 using the diagnostic poll method, which included 224 rural inhabitants. The study shows that only a small percentage of inhabitants of rural areas make the type of environmentally-friendly choices in their everyday lives which would make them environmentally conscious consumers.

Key words: environmental awareness, rural areas, sustainable development, Poland

Introduction

Increasing technical and technological progress as well as more intensive production resulting from a growing population may contribute to excessive use of natural resources. The phenomenon of rarity, stemming from a limited amount of such resources, is the most visible in developed countries. Therefore, it is of the essence to develop environmental awareness, which leads to thoughtful shopping decisions and everyday behaviors in keeping with requirements of environmental protection (saving water and electricity, waste sorting and recycling, etc.).

The aim of this study was to analyse the level of environmental awareness among inhabitants of rural areas. The research assumption was that people's environmental awareness is expressed not only in their level of environmental knowledge and imagination, but also in their value systems. Values play the role of criteria in the choice of social goals, they are a standard of an individual's integration with society, and they differentiate the social sphere of human personality.

The study, conducted in 2014, used the diagnostic poll method. As T. Pilch writes, this method is used for gathering data on characteristic features of a given community, both its structural and functional aspects. It also serves to diagnose opinions, attitudes, views, and the dynamics of the direction of change of social phenomena, which due to their non-institutionalised character can be examined on the basis of a targeted representative sample of a given population [Pilch 1998]. The poll was conducted with the participation of 224 randomly selected inhabitants of the rural areas of the Chojnicki *powiat* (county). The basis of the research method was a survey using a structured questionnaire. The results are

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broken down by men (99) and women (125). The obtained data underwent a statistical analysis. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet was used to prepare the calculations.

The concept of environmental awareness

Environmental awareness refers to the ideas, values, and opinions about the environment as a place in man's life and development, common for certain social groups during a historical period. It can also refer to the state of people's knowledge, opinions, and notions about the role of the environment in human life, including the state of knowledge about methods and tools for the management of using, protecting, and shaping the environment [Zarządzanie środowiskiem... 2007].

People develop their environmental awareness under the influence of commonly accepted social norms, information in the mass media, and various forms of environmental education. It is also dependent on the conditions in which economic entities function. Therefore, in protected areas, due to their specific conditions, environmental awareness will be higher and will usually develop under the influence of personal experiences which result from functioning in such a specific territory.

Z. Hull, defining the concept of environmental awareness, gave it two dimensions: individual and collective. In the individual dimension, the term referred to experiencing ways of thinking about the natural environment by individuals, whereas in the collective dimension, it referred to standards of understanding, experiencing, and evaluating the biosphere. Environmental awareness is, according to him, "a form of social awareness manifesting itself both in the thinking and experiences of individuals and in standards of understanding, experiencing, and evaluating the biosphere which function in society" [Hull 1984].

Environmental awareness is also developed under the influence of instruments of social interaction used by the state, which can be divided into formal and informal instruments. The former involve legal regulations, where environmental education, access to information about the environment, and lobbying in legislative organs play a special role [Zarządzanie środowiskiem... 2007].

Informal instruments include, among others, informal environmental education (such as conversations in informal groups of stakeholders), informational activities (such as publishing educational materials, organising exhibitions, seminars, and mass campaigns promoting environmental protection), social pressure (paying attention to aspects connected to the protection of and danger to the environment), or social services (such as information centres) [Zarządzanie środowiskiem..., 2007].

Another dimension of environmental awareness is the awareness of dangers which can threaten the environment as a result of its misuse. As P. Gliński notes, it is an indicator of environmental values and includes:

1. intuitive beliefs about environmental risks or a negative impact of such risks on man's needs (the most common type of awareness),
2. knowledge of mechanisms of risk, processes of environmental degradation, and awareness of how the environment (or its elements) impact people,
3. an emotional reaction connected with a stress-inducing and confirmed by research influence of a devastated environment on the mental sphere; and a behavioural level related to pro-environmental activities, both individual and collective [Gliński 1998].

Results and discussion

The basis of building social awareness, including environmental awareness, as an integral part of sustainable development, is knowledge, its accumulation, processing, and application in practice [Hłobił 2010]. This is also the case of inhabitants of rural areas. Table 1 presents issues which are components of education for sustainable development, which in practice should translate into environmental awareness and environmentally-conscious consumer attitudes.

Table 1. Issues of education for sustainable development

Area of sustainable development	Issues
SOCIAL	human rights peace and safety gender equality cultural variety and mutual understanding of cultures health, incl. AIDS prevention good governing
ENVIRONMENTAL	natural resources climate change development of agriculture sustainable urbanization prevention of disasters and alleviation of their effects
ECONOMIC	decreasing the scale of poverty responsibility of businesses market economy

Source: J. Godlewska, Education for Sustainable Development [in:] Sustainable Development – aspects of the development of local communities, Fundacja Forum Inicjatyw Rozwojowych, Białystok 2009:16-17.

For a common sustainable future, it is of vital importance what kind of environmental awareness is shown by a society and whether it translates into creative behaviors concerning the natural environment and its resources.

The polled inhabitants of rural areas were asked to evaluate the level of their environmental awareness (Fig. 1). The majority of the polled inhabitants of rural areas (73.7%) evaluated the level of environmental awareness as low. It can be deduced that some respondents do not have knowledge of environmental and eco-conscious consumer behaviours, and others are not aware of such knowledge. Only 26.3% of the respondents cannot claim to use environmental knowledge in practice. Interestingly, a slightly higher number of women admit to a lower level of environmental awareness.

Narrowly defined environmental awareness is understood in the categories of knowledge, opinions, and notions about the environment. A broad definition of environmental awareness is understood as a result of “noting and appreciating the significance of the connection between a society’s economic activity and the process of environmental devastation and degradation” [Papuziński 2006].

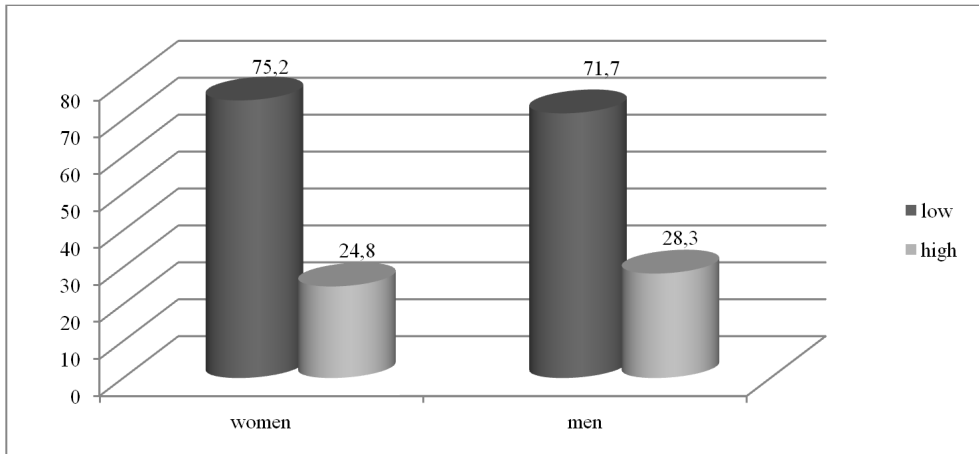


Fig. 1. Evaluation of the level of environmental awareness by respondents [in %]

Source: authors' research

Contemporary environmental problems increasingly focus on man and his activity, as well as the values he represents. This leads to the ability to apply environmental knowledge in practice and to the growth of this awareness.

A practical application of their awareness in everyday life (Fig. 2) is declared by only 32.1% of the respondents (with a slight majority of women). 23.7% of the respondents (with a clear majority of men) admitted to a complete lack of implementation of sensible environmentally-friendly recommendations. Slightly more than 44% of the respondents could not say whether they use their environmental knowledge in everyday life.

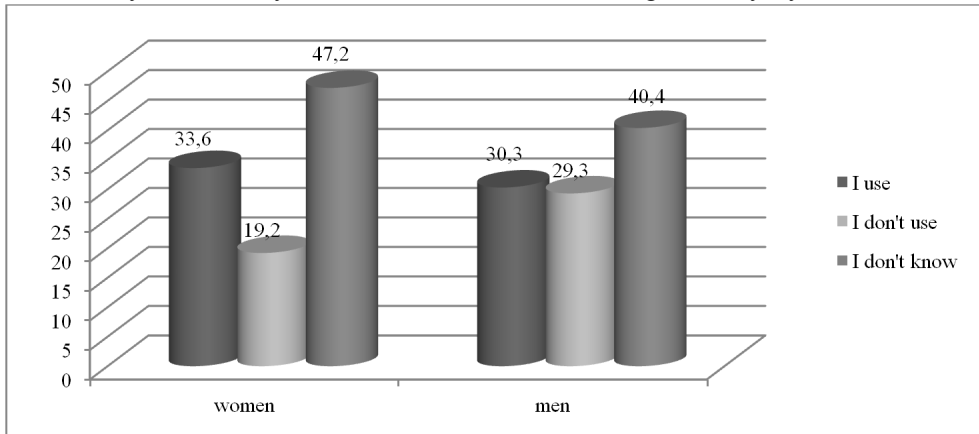


Fig. 2. Practical use of respondents' awareness in everyday life by respondents [in %]

Source: authors' research

Common environmental awareness is developed in everyday life, in economic activity, in education, in generational legacy, etc. It is a complicated social process, usually closely related to the state of the natural environment and the resultant quality of people's life. On the other hand, informal environmental awareness is formed mainly under the influence of heard opinions, views, and stereotypes, which do not constitute a consistent whole. Unfortunately, knowledge, usually partial, and people's own experiences play a much smaller role in building environmental awareness.

Environmental awareness is born in specific circumstances; it is a consequence of man's concern for the quality of human life in the face of progressing environmental degradation, especially such elements of the environment which have a direct impact on man's physical and mental health [Papuziński 2006]. The polled inhabitants of rural areas acquire their environmental knowledge mainly from the media (Fig. 3). Out of the 224 respondents, as many as 107 (47.8%) admitted to this. Some respondents declared that they acquired their knowledge of environmentally-friendly behaviours at school (15.2%), which means that school, which should educate and develop environmentally-friendly attitudes, did not fulfill its educational role. Another source of environmental knowledge is practice and the respondents' own experience (27.2%).

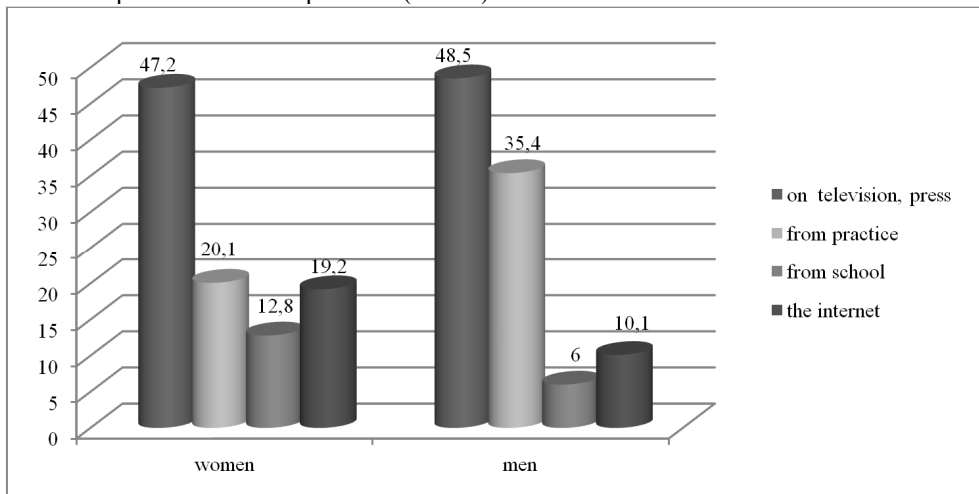


Fig. 3. Sources of ecological knowledge by respondents [in %]

Source: authors' research

Holistic ethics not only impose certain obligations on people with regard to the natural world, but even require sacrifice (concessions) in their favour, similar to interpersonal relations. According to this theory, man should be in a way subordinate to nature and fulfill his obligations towards it [Kryk 2005]. One of such obligations is making wise decisions with regard to shopping.

Slightly more than a half of the polled inhabitants of rural areas have never paid any attention to the type of packaging in order to reuse it. On the other hand, 22% of the respondents always do, with women doing so slightly more often (22.4%). 36.4% of men and 20.8% of women sometimes pay attention to the choice of packaging while making purchases (Fig. 4).

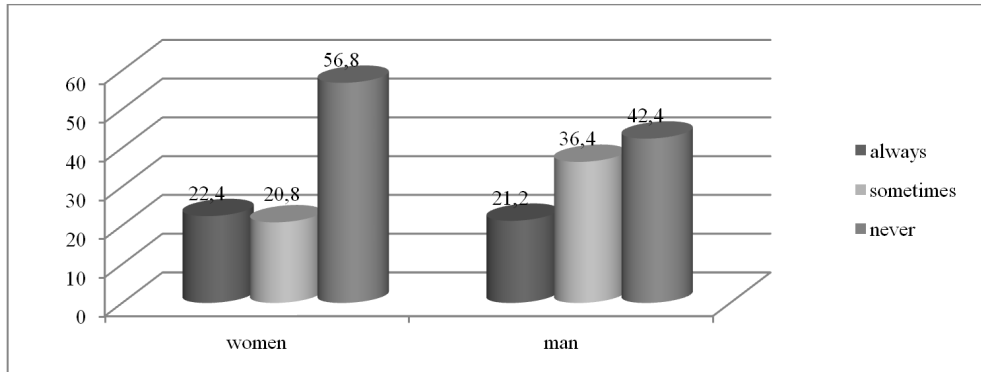


Fig. 4. Paying attention to the type of packaging (possibility of secondary use) while making purchases by respondents [in %]

Source: authors' research

Not all consumers are aware of the importance of packaging choices. The respondents who are aware of the negative impact it can have on the environment chose products in environmentally-friendly packaging more often. They felt that if packaging could be recycled and reused they were contributing to environmental protection.

The polled respondents tried to save water and electricity (Fig. 5), which may stem not only from their concern for the environment but mainly from the fact that these goods constitute the largest expenses in their household budgets. The respondents interested in the subject of environmental protection were considerably more influenced by the energy class of products in their purchases of household appliances and consumer electronics (women – 47.2%, men – 39.4%). Using energy-efficient light bulbs was important to 30.4% of the respondents, with men showing greater interest (28.8%). The issue of water saving was important to only 26.3% of the respondents participating in the study, with 1.9% more women than men.

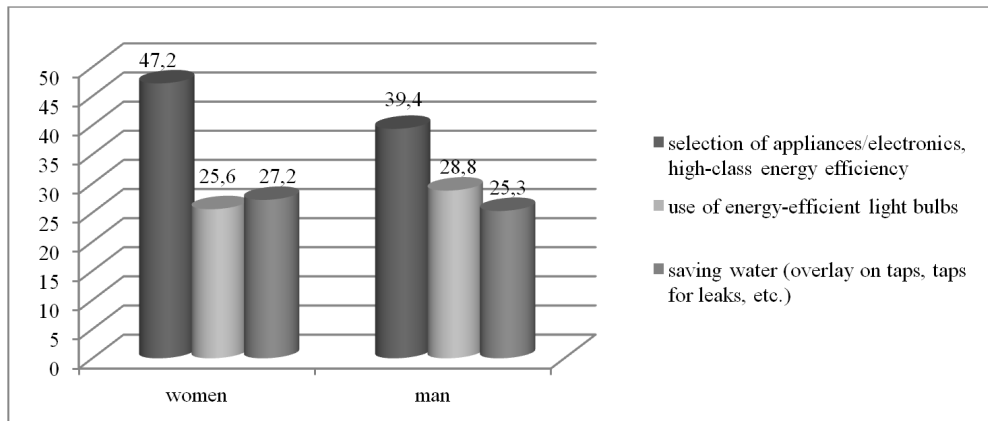


Fig. 5. Saving water and electricity by respondents

Source: authors' research

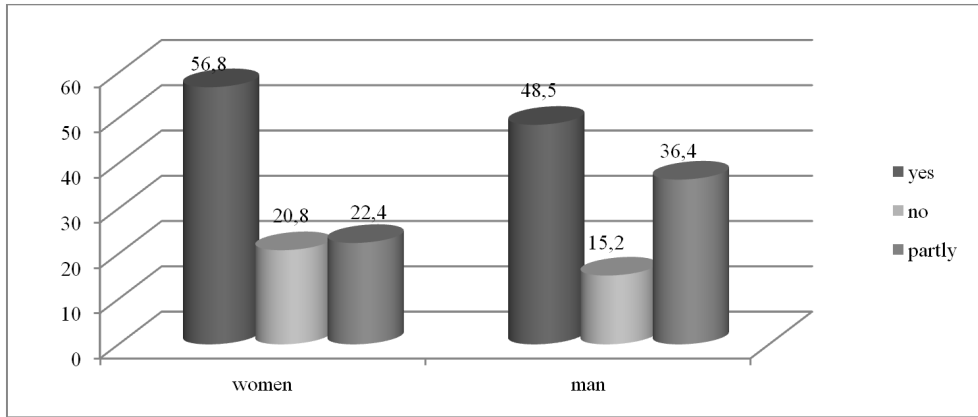


Fig. 6. Waste sorting [in %]

Source: authors' research.

One of the elements of an integrated system of managing household waste in rural areas is its sorting, without which environmental protection would be impossible to consider. Sorting facilitates the reuse and utilisation of waste. Slightly more than a half of the respondents (53.1%) sort waste. Only 28.6 of the respondents partly sort waste. Unfortunately, almost one fifth of the respondents do not sort waste.

Conclusions

The improvement of the state of the natural environment does not happen automatically since it requires an increase of social awareness which translates into environmentally-friendly behaviors. High significance is attached to environmentally-conscious consumption. A high level of environmental awareness allows consumers to make correct choices with regard to their shopping decisions, saving water and electrical power, waste sorting etc. An environmentally-conscious consumer will use energy-efficient light bulbs, will pay attention to the energy class of household appliances and consumer electronics, will not waste water, will sort waste, will pay attention to the type of packaging and the possibility of its reuse when shopping, and will use biodegradable or reusable shopping bags.

The social potential of the readiness to undertake individual actions for the benefit of the environment is large, and environmental values are considered to be important by many Poles. However, this includes both actual actions and the readiness to undertake actions, as well as declarations resulting from political correctness. There is a visibly large discrepancy between declarations and actual actions and behaviors of Poles. In order to take advantage of the mentioned potential, large-scale and diverse actions need to be taken by public institutions, the system, education, and non-government organisations alike. Favourable conditions should be created to encourage environmentally-friendly actions and such behaviors should be encouraged in a much more forceful way, for example through economic and administrative instruments and proper social engineering.

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