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Undergraduate student perceptions of environmental issues.

Students enrolled in ecology or environmental science courses for non-majors often have misconceptions related to anthropogenic forcing of climate change and sustainability. The purpose of this study was to examine the sources of these misconceptions and to evaluate students' confidence in their understanding of environmental issues. The data for the study came from 23 student interviews. When asked what the word "environment" meant to them, 81% of students responded that it represented the physical environment. Students were asked where they obtained their information about the environment, and 18% responded from their teachers or classes; 18% responded social media, and 18% responded family and friends. The remainder of responses were scattered among several categories. When asked specifically about climate change, 88% stated change was occurring and that it was related to human causes. The average confidence was 69% (mode = 75%). When asked about ecological sustainability, 100% of respondents understood the term with self-reported confidence in their answers averaging 74% (mode = 80%). When compared to surveys completed by the same cohort, we found that 75% of responses matched the interview questions. In conclusion, we found that students' perceptions of environment originate from a variety of sources, and that friends and family have a greater influence than television and social media.

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