

# Perceptions of Environmental Change in Atlantic Canada

## Survey Report

September 2021

Climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation are major threats of the 21st century. Such crises are global in scope, but they manifest in everyday life through small, incremental changes that people observe in their local environments. For this reason, researchers at Dalhousie University, Memorial University of Newfoundland, and Western University – in partnership with the Rural Futures Research Centre and with funding from the Ocean Frontier Institute – conducted an online survey of Atlantic Canadians to learn how they relate to the natural environment in their communities and whether they perceive changes.

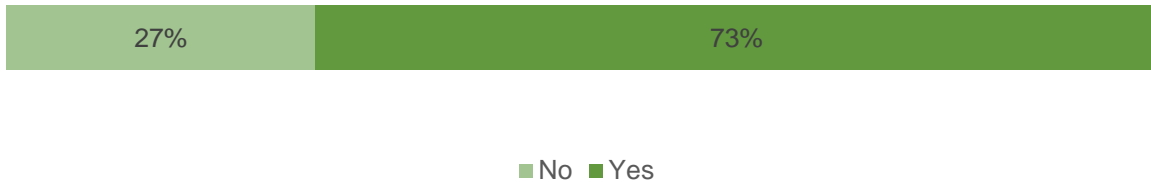
This report examines the environmental changes Atlantic Canadians are seeing in their communities and explores how they feel about and respond to the changes they observe.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Most Atlantic Canadians recognize that climate change is occurring and that it is caused by human activities. The majority agreed that it is incumbent on Canada to act on climate change and that doing so is more important than economic growth.
- Almost three-quarters of Atlantic Canadians noticed changes in the natural environment in their communities in the last 5-10 years.
- Many participants expressed concerns about clearcutting, changing weather patterns, coastal erosion, and the effects of human activities and development on local flora and fauna.
- Many Atlantic Canadians have regular access to a variety of environmental spaces, including bodies of water and woodlands. About 9 in 10 find their natural environment pleasant or attractive and feel a sense of belonging in it.
- The vast majority of participants engage in several kinds of everyday actions to help protect the environment, such as recycling, replacing disposable items with reusable alternatives, and choosing local food. Other actions are also common, including reducing meat consumption, making home improvements (e.g., sealing windows and doors), as well as political action (e.g., voting, joining environmental organizations, or participating in demonstrations).

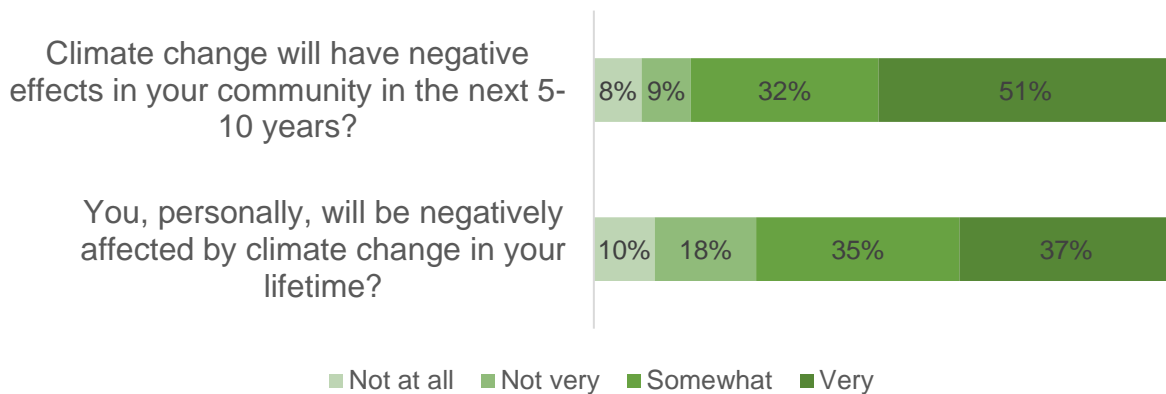
## CLIMATE CHANGE IN ATLANTIC CANADA

Have Atlantic Canadians perceived negative effects of climate change in their community?



Atlantic Canadians perceive negative changes in their environment, and they recognize these changes as symptoms of climate change. Almost three-quarters<sup>1</sup> (73%) said they believed that climate change had had negative effects on the natural environment in their community. More than half (51%) believe it is “very likely” that their community will experience negative effects of climate change in the next 5 to 10 years, while nearly one-third (32%) consider these effects “somewhat likely.”

How likely is it that...



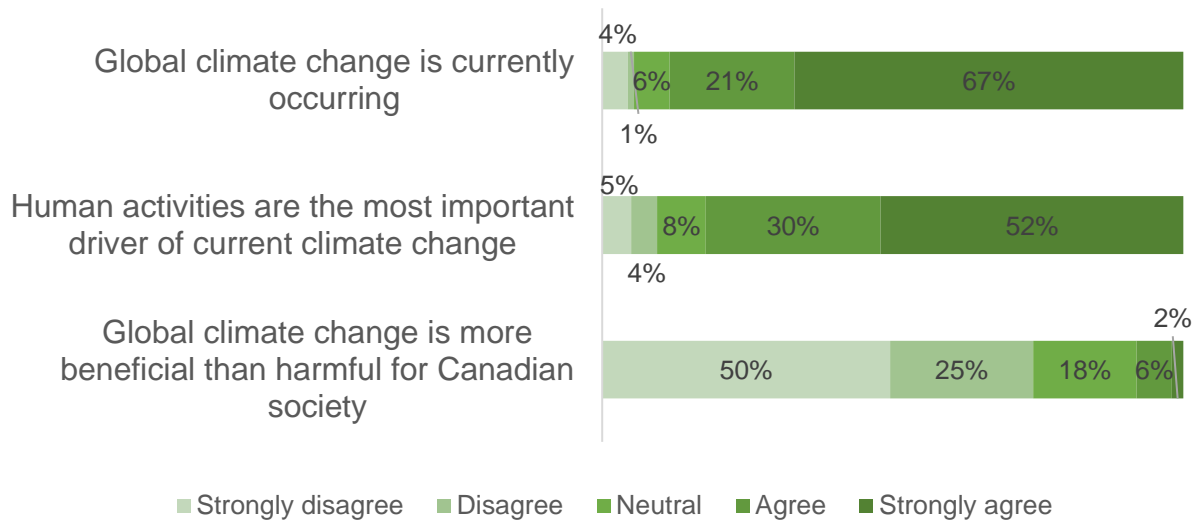
Thirty-seven percent believe it is “very likely” that they, personally, will be negatively affected by climate change in their lifetime, while another 35% believe it is “somewhat likely.” Only 1 in 10 Atlantic Canadians believe it is “not at all likely” that they will experience negative effects of climate change in their lifetime.

Most Atlantic Canadians recognize that climate change is happening and that it is caused by human activities. Two-thirds (67%) strongly agreed that global climate change is currently occurring and about one-fifth (21%) agreed, while only 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Similarly, more than four-fifths (82%) of Atlantic Canadians agreed or strongly agreed that human activities are the most important

<sup>1</sup> For all figures provided, survey weights were applied to responses to better approximate the perceptions and views of all Atlantic Canadians. For more details, see Survey Methodology on page 10.

driver of climate change, while only about 1 in 10 (9%) disagreed or strongly disagreed.

### Atlantic Canadians' views on climate change

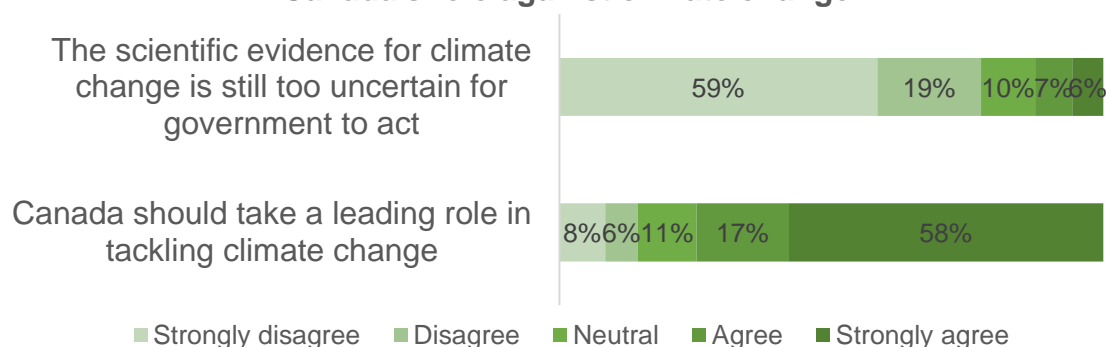


Only small minority (8%) agreed or strongly agreed that climate change is more beneficial than harmful to Canadian society. Three-quarters disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, recognizing the dangers and harmful effects of rapid warming and climate change.

### ATLANTIC CANADIANS WANT ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

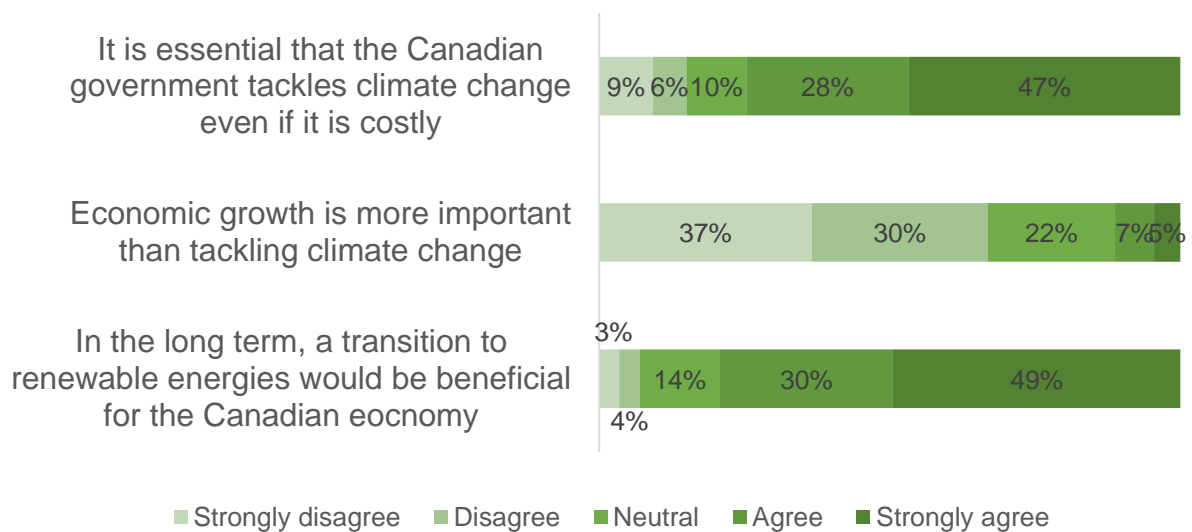
Survey participants were asked for their views on a number of issues related to climate change and Canadian policy, government, and the economy. The majority agreed that it is incumbent on Canada to act on climate change. More than three-quarters (78%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that the scientific evidence for climate change is still too uncertain for governments to act, and three-quarters (75%) also agreed or strongly agreed that Canada should take a leading role in tackling climate change.

### Canada's role against climate change



While economic concerns are common in Atlantic Canada, most residents believe that environmental issues should take precedence. Three-quarters (75%) agreed or strongly agreed that the Canadian government must tackle climate change even if it is costly, while two-thirds (67%) disagreed that economic growth is more important than tackling climate change. Most Atlantic Canadians agree that action on the environment will be good for the economy in the long run, with nearly 4 in 5 (79%) agreeing or strongly agreeing that a transition to renewable energies will benefit the Canadian economy.

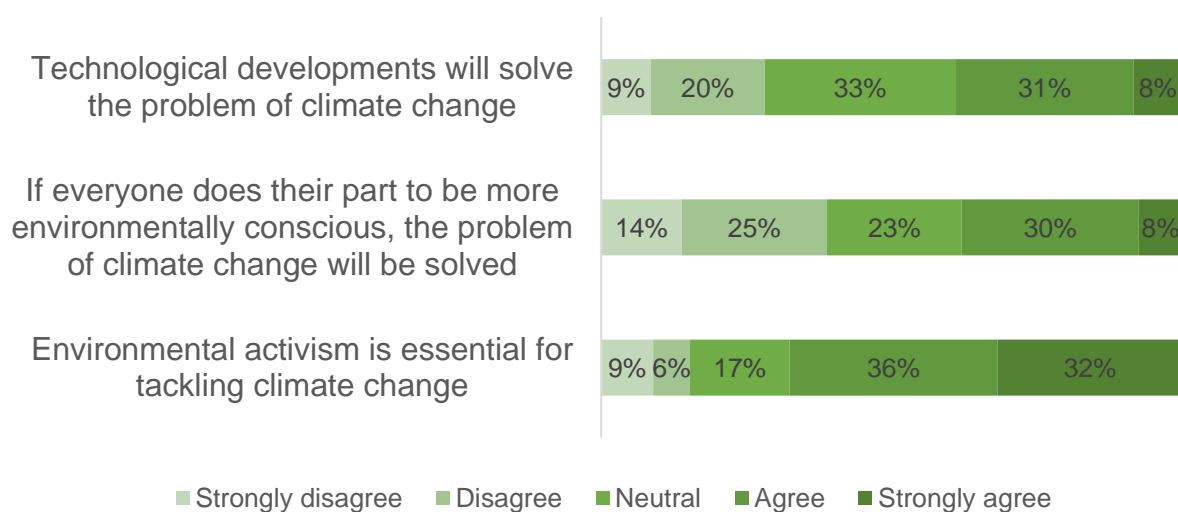
### Climate change and the economy



Even as participants generally agreed on the importance of tackling climate change in Canada, they had more mixed views on how—or whether—the problem of climate change will ultimately be solved. Many recognized the importance of renewable energy technologies, but only about 2 in 5 (39%) agreed or strongly agreed that technological developments will solve the problem, while nearly one-third (29%) disagreed or strongly disagreed and one-third (33%) were neutral. This points to a relatively low level of optimism that technology will provide a “silver bullet” to escape the consequences of climate change.

Similarly, 38% agreed or strongly agreed that climate change will be solved if everyone does their part to be more environmentally conscious—but 39% disagreed or strongly disagreed with this sentiment. Nevertheless, Atlantic Canadians recognize the need for public engagement on climate change. Two-thirds (68%) were in agreement that environmental activism is essential for tackling climate change. Civil society and environmental non-governmental organizations have a crucial role to play in urging government action, especially in those provinces where politicians have been slow to act on climate change.

## Addressing and solving climate change



## WHAT ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES ARE ATLANTIC CANADIANS PERCEIVING?

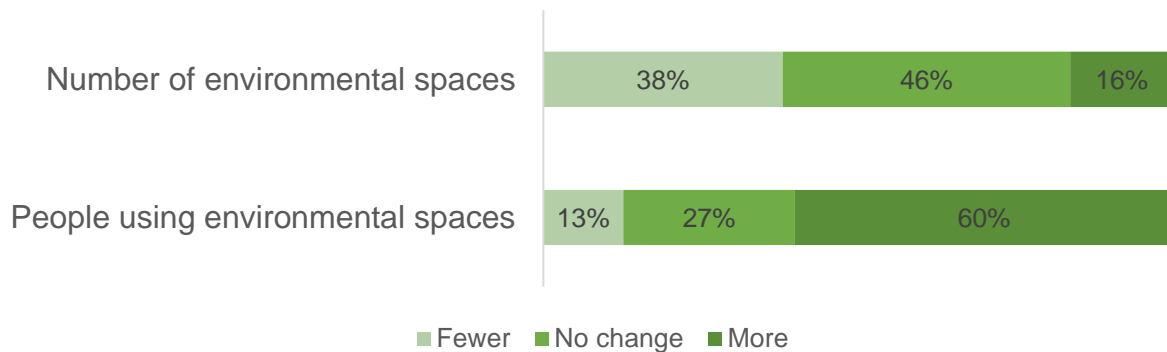
Almost three-quarters (74%) of participants reported that they had noticed changes in the natural environment in their communities over the last 5 to 10 years, many of which were evidently negative. When asked about the biggest environmental changes they had noticed, participants named a number of different changes in their communities, but many of the responses had common themes.

- **Clearcutting and deforestation** – especially for the purposes of new buildings and residential development
- **Weather patterns** – including warmer weather, more storms and unpredictable weather, changes in the amount of precipitation, and seasonal changes
- **Bodies of water and coastline** – especially coastal erosion, changes in water levels, and concerns about worsening water quality
- **Local flora and fauna** – including loss of species, more invasive species and pests, and concerns about the effect of human activities on wildlife habitats
- **Outdoor infrastructure** – more development and expansion of trail systems and other natural spaces, but concerns about the declining quality of these spaces

Participants also answered follow-up questions about different kinds of changes in the natural environment. While the majority of participants said that the number of environmental spaces either had not changed (46%) or had increased (16%) in the last 5 to 10 years, 38% noticed fewer environmental spaces—a result of the building

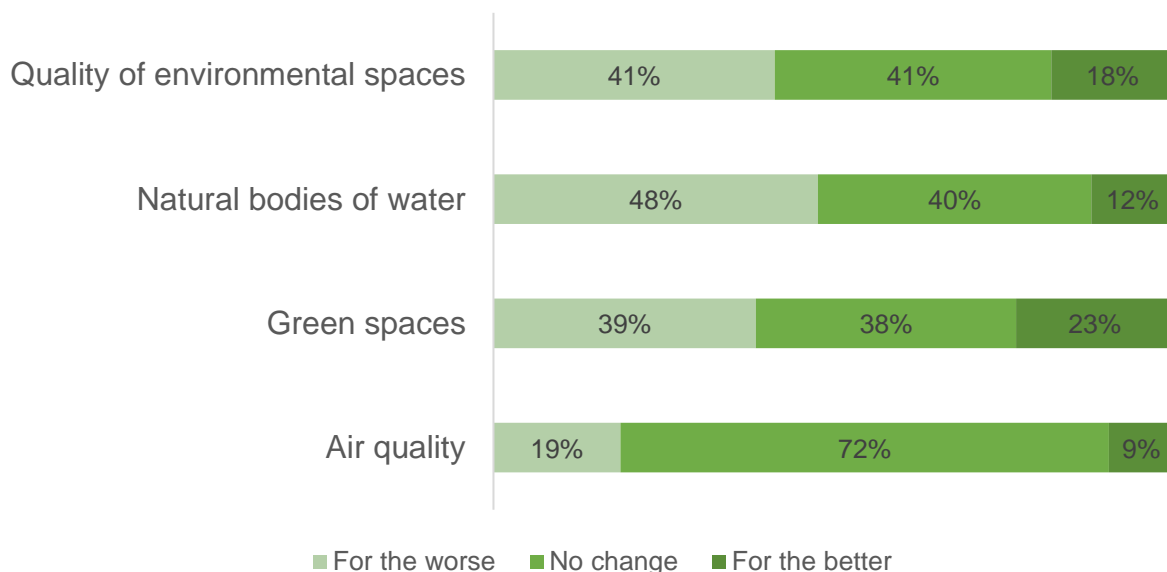
and development noted by many. Meanwhile, 60% noticed more people using environmental spaces compared to 5 to 10 years ago. This perception may be related to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which we conducted this survey. However, findings from Perceptions of Change surveys completed in 2017 and 2019 indicate that increased use of parks and green spaces predates the pandemic and is likely to continue even when it is over.

### Perceptions of change in environmental spaces in Atlantic Canadians' communities



The vast majority of participants were divided between perceiving no change or change for the worse in the quality of environmental spaces, natural bodies of water, green spaces, and air quality. Only a small proportion of Atlantic Canadians observed changes for the better, while a substantial number of people found that changes were for the worse, particularly in the quality of environmental spaces (41%), natural bodies of water (48%), and green spaces (39%). Nearly 1 in 5 participants (19%) noticed a decline in air quality compared to 5 to 10 years ago.

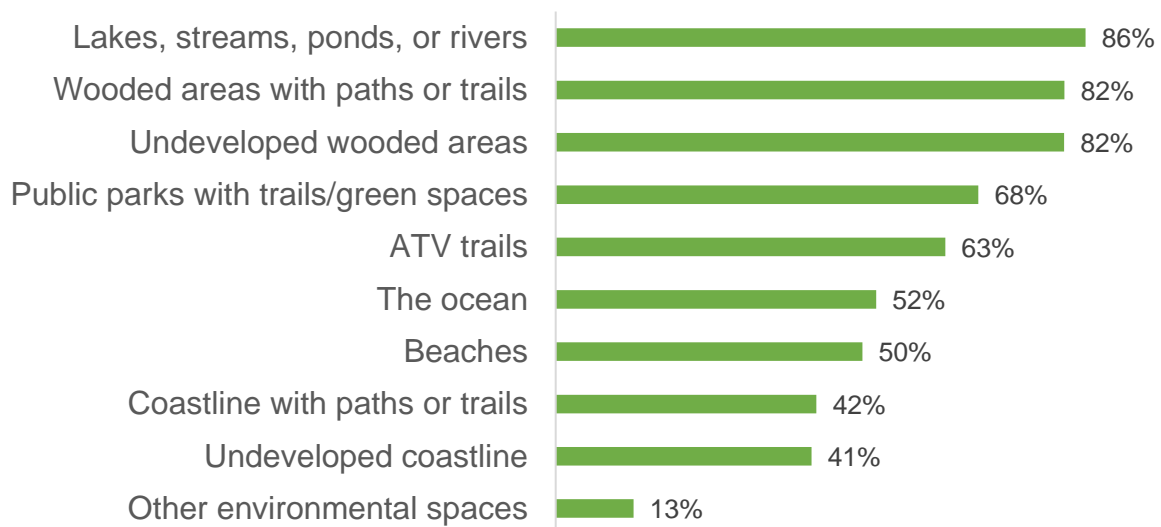
### Perceptions of change in the natural environment in Atlantic Canadians' communities



## THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT IN ATLANTIC CANADIANS' COMMUNITIES

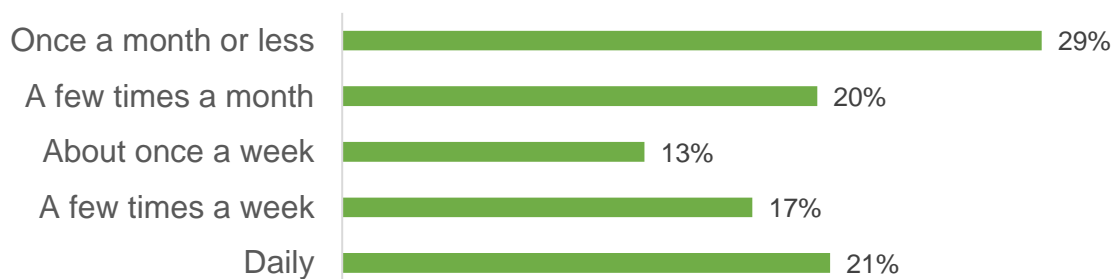
Participants from across Atlantic Canada reported having several different types of environmental spaces in their community. Two-thirds had 5 or more of the following environmental spaces in their community, while only 8% had 1 or 2 environmental spaces. The most common environmental spaces were fresh-water bodies such as lakes or rivers (86%) and wooded areas, both with paths or trails (82%) and undeveloped (82%). Other common environmental spaces included public parks (68%), ATV trails (63%), and the ocean (52%).

### Environmental spaces in Atlantic Canadians' communities



These environmental spaces make up the landscape of the region, and most participants reported spending time in these spaces regularly. About 1 in 5 Atlantic Canadians (21%) visit these spaces daily, and more than half (51%) visit them about once a week or more, while almost one-third (29%) visit them once a month or less.

### How often do Atlantic Canadians visit environmental spaces in their communities?

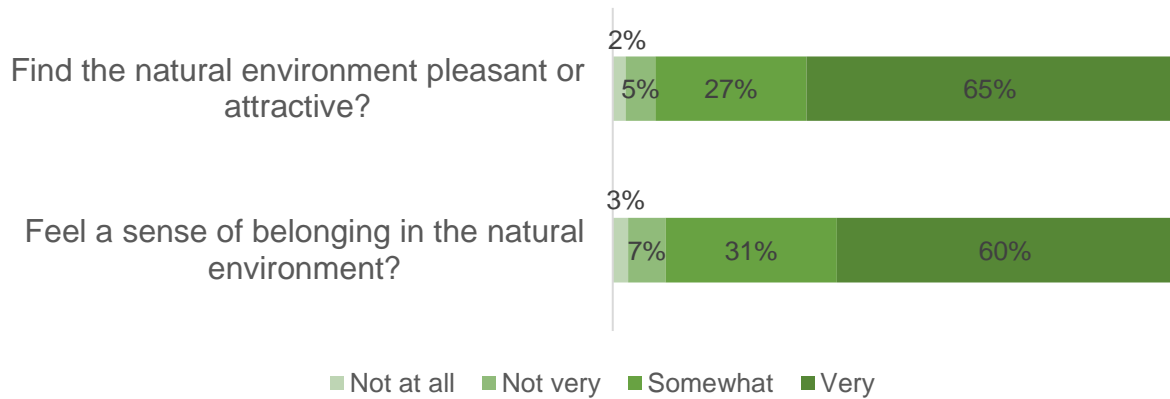


Most participants expressed positive feelings towards the environmental spaces in their community. Almost two-thirds (65%) found these spaces to be “very pleasant or



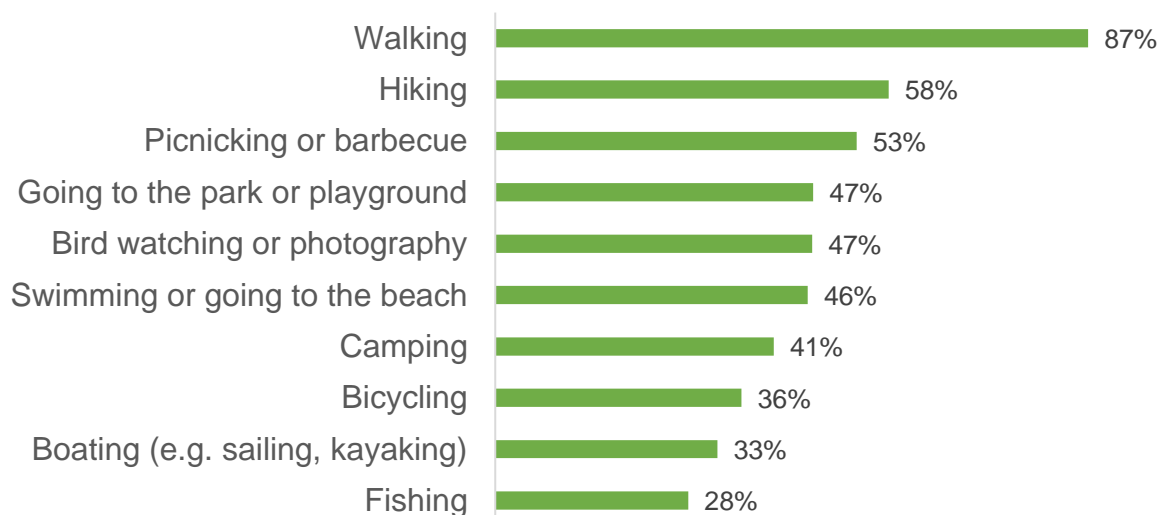
attractive,” and a little more than one-quarter (27%) found them “somewhat pleasant or attractive.” Three in 5 Atlantic Canadians (60%) reported they “very much” feel a sense of belonging in these spaces, while only 10% said “not very much” or “not at all.”

### Do Atlantic Canadians...



Many participants spend their time outdoors getting exercise by walking (87%) and hiking (58%) or doing leisure activities such as picnicking (53%), going to the park (47%), bird watching or photography (47%), swimming or going to the beach (46%) or camping (41%). The most common activities are simple, accessible ways to enjoy the outdoors that do not require much specialized equipment or investment. Bicycling (36%), boating (33%), and fishing (28%) were also common, as well as a wide variety of other sports and activities, including jogging, hunting, and ATVing.

### Outdoor leisure activities of Atlantic Canadians: Top 10



## WHAT ACTIONS ARE ATLANTIC CANADIANS TAKING TO FIGHT CLIMATE CHANGE?

In big and small ways, many Atlantic Canadians are already taking action to fight climate change and protect the natural environment. Participants were asked which actions they have taken to protect the environment. Most reported that they recycle (97%) and have replaced disposable items (e.g., coffee cups, shopping bags) with reusable alternatives (91%). These actions are expected as a result of by-laws across much of Atlantic Canada that require separate disposal of recyclable materials, as well as the nationwide phase-out of single-use plastics. Many Atlantic Canadians also said that they buy local food (87%) and support local businesses (86%).

A large number of participants have made lifestyle changes such as eating less meat (41%), reducing plane travel (41%), cycling or using public transit (27%), and following a vegetarian or vegan diet (12%). Minor changes around the home (e.g., sealing windows and doors) are also common (64%), while major home changes, which may be cost prohibitive (e.g., solar panels), are less common (14%).

### **Which types of actions do you take to protect the environment?**

Recycling	97%
Replacing disposable items with alternatives (e.g. shopping bags)	91%
Buying local food	87%
Supporting local businesses	86%
Composting	72%
Minor home changes (e.g. sealing windows, doors)	64%
Supporting politicians/parties with strong environmental platform	55%
Eating less meat	41%
Reducing plane travel	41%
Joining environmentalist organizations or community groups	32%
Writing to politicians about environmental concerns	31%
Using alternative transportation (e.g. cycling, public transit)	27%
Participating in demonstrations against climate change	20%
Major home changes (e.g. solar panels)	14%
Following a vegetarian or vegan diet	12%
Driving an electric vehicle	6%
Other	12%

Not all environmental actions are confined to people's homes and personal lives. Many participants are also taking some form of political action. More than half (55%) claimed to support politicians or political parties with strong environmental platforms. Almost one-third (32%) said they had joined an environmentalist organization or community group, and 31% said they had written to politicians about an environmental concern. One-fifth (20%) had participated in a demonstration against climate change.

## **SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

The survey was conducted online from February to April 2021 using Qualtrics survey software. Data were collected prior to the release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report on the dire state of the climate crisis in the summer of 2021. The questionnaire was initially sent to members of the Ocean Frontier Institute's Future Ocean and Coastal Infrastructures project and their partners to share with their communities in Atlantic Canada. To increase and broaden the sample, more participants were recruited using Facebook and Google Ads targeted at Atlantic Canada. All 1119 participants included in the analysis were residents of Atlantic Canada at the time of completing the survey.

Although efforts were made to recruit a wide variety of participants from Atlantic Canada, some demographic skew resulted from the non-random sampling used for this survey. More women than men participated in the survey and participants tended to have higher levels of education than average for the region. To better approximate the perceptions and views of Atlantic Canadians, a weighting factor was applied to yield the figures provided in this report. This weighting factor adjusts results to reflect the actual composition of Atlantic Canada more closely in terms of age, education, gender, province of residence, as well as the proportion of residents who are immigrants, visible minorities, or Indigenous.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The survey was designed and conducted by a team of researchers led by Dr. Howard Ramos and Dr. Karen Foster. The following people provided feedback on this report: Dr. Gillian Kerr, Dr. Mark Stoddart, Dr. Tarah Wright, and research assistants Brenna Sobanski and Matthew Stackhouse.

## **FUNDING**

Research funding was provided by the Ocean Frontier Institute through an award from the Canada First Research Excellence Fund.

## **REPORT CITATION**

McLay, Rachel and Howard Ramos. 2021. "Perceptions of Environmental Change in Atlantic Canada." Future Ocean and Coastal Infrastructures Project: Work Package 6. September 7.