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Oceans Protection Plan - Canadians' Confidence in Marine Safety 2024

Public Opinion Research Report

Prepared for Transport Canada

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Canada

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This public opinion research report presents the results of an online and telephone survey with 3,100 Canadians conducted by Pollara Strategic Insights Inc. on behalf of Transport Canada. In-depth interviews with Indigenous partners and marine stakeholders were also conducted during the same time.

Cette publication est aussi disponible en français sous le titre : Plan de protection des océans – la confiance des Canadiens à l'égard de la sécurité maritime 2024.

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The logo for the word "Canada" in a large, black, serif font. A small red and white Canadian flag is positioned above the letter 'a'.

Executive Summary

A. Research Background and Objectives

The Oceans Protection Plan is the largest investment ever made to protect Canada's coasts and waterways. It provides world-leading marine safety that creates economic opportunities for Canadians today, while protecting our coastlines for generations to come.

The Oceans Protection Plan brings together Transport Canada, Indigenous partners, coastal communities, the marine industry and other stakeholders to develop and improve Canada's marine safety system. It falls under Transport Canada's mandate. Transport Canada has been regularly conducting public opinion research to measure Canadians' awareness of issues and level of confidence surrounding marine safety, ecosystems protections, and the Oceans Protection Plan. This research measured awareness and confidence in Canada's marine safety system, the awareness, importance and impact of the Oceans Protection Plan, and the roles played by government and other organizations in developing and addressing marine safety.

This research will inform communications planning, outreach, and engagement in marine safety, as well as serve to measure improvement in relationships with Indigenous Peoples, coastal communities, Indigenous partners, and marine stakeholders.

B. Brief methodology

To meet the research objectives, Pollara designed a quantitative and qualitative component of research.

For the quantitative component, Pollara conducted a survey with n=3,100 Canadians. Though a margin of error cannot be assigned to online surveys, a probability sample of this size would have a margin of error of $\pm 1.8\%$, 19 times out of 20. This sample included n=624 surveys with Indigenous Peoples and n=1,656 surveys with residents living in coastal communities in Canada. Most of the completed surveys (n=3,076) were collected through an online panel, with n=40 completed surveys across the territories collected through telephonic interviews conducted by a team of trained, bilingual interviewers. The survey was conducted between December 5, 2023, and January 16, 2024, in English and French.

Findings are reported separately for the general population, Indigenous Peoples, and Canadians residing in coastal communities. Where possible, the results have been tracked against a 2018 baseline survey of n=3,407 (n=2,168 public and n=1,239 Indigenous Peoples), a 2020 survey of n=2,702 (n=2,141 public and n=561 Indigenous Peoples), and a 2022 survey of n=2,791 (n=2,224 public and n=600 Indigenous Peoples).

For the qualitative component, in-depth interviews were conducted by telephone with 25 Indigenous partners and 27 Marine stakeholders. These interviews were conducted between December 2023 and January 2024 in English and French.

The process for collection is described separately in Appendix A (Quantitative Methodology) and Appendix B (Qualitative Methodology). Appendix C presents the survey questionnaire and Appendix D presents the interview guide for Indigenous partners and Marine Stakeholders in-depth interviews.

C. Summary of Key Findings

Perceptions of Canada's Marine Safety System

Canadians have limited top-of-mind awareness of general marine safety issues. While 32% to 43% demonstrate at least a moderate degree of awareness, only 7% to 11% say they are very aware of marine safety issues such as safe shipping practices, steps taken to protect the marine environment, responding to offshore spills and maintaining the reliability and strength of Canada's supply chain. These awareness levels have been trending down since 2018. Despite Canadians exhibiting low awareness of marine safety concerns, they largely believe that addressing these issues is highly important to them, particularly responding to offshore spills and accidents and protecting the marine ecosystem.

There is moderate awareness of programs and initiatives set up by the Government of Canada to respond to, prevent and monitor oil spills and incidents. Public confidence in Canada's marine oil spill response system is also modest. Specifically, 72% express at least moderate confidence in the system's ability to prepare for and respond in a timely manner to oil spills, and 59% express a similar degree of confidence in the system's ability to prevent oil spills and hold polluters accountable for covering the costs associated with spill clean ups.

Seven in ten (69%) have some degree of confidence in Canada's marine safety system and that marine habitats and species are protected in Canada. Notably, Canadians continue to express modest confidence in the marine safety system, with confidence levels higher than 2022, and similar to levels seen in 2018 and 2020. These positive to modest perceptions are primarily due to the public believing that Canada has laws, regulations, and policies in place with a reputation of being environmentally active and aware.

Residents in coastal communities are somewhat more aware of the broader aspects of Canada's marine safety system as well as the specific programs and initiatives set up by the Government of Canada. They place a higher importance on responding to offshore spills, incidents and emergencies, protecting the marine environment and maintaining the reliability and strength of the supply chain. This cohort exhibits marginally higher confidence in the capabilities of Canada's marine oil spill response system compared to the public.

Indigenous Peoples report slightly higher levels of awareness and give slightly higher importance to marine safety aspects than the general population. They are less likely to feel confident in Canada's marine safety system and the ability to protect the marine ecosystem but are similar to the public when it comes to feeling confident about Canada's marine oil spill response system. Notably, Indigenous Peoples residing in coastal regions are much more likely to be aware of marine safety issues in general and the specific initiatives and programs set up by the government. These issues are much more important to them, and they express higher degrees of confidence in the government's ability to protect the waterways and marine habitat in Canada.

These findings align with the views of Indigenous partners who emphasize the cultural and traditional significance of oceans and waterways, and that they depend on these for survival as well as recreation. While expressing concerns about marine shipping, pollution, impacts on the aquatic ecosystem and the impacts on human safety, they also appreciate the efforts taken by the government.

Marine stakeholders express similar views to Indigenous partners. They also mention the utilitarian role that Canada's oceans and waterways play (especially among those on the east coast). They emphasize the economic significance of shipping, tourism, and fisheries, while reinstating the importance of marine safety including sustainable management and conservation efforts that are crucial for future generations.

Perceptions of the Oceans Protection Plan (Oceans Protection Plan)

Given Canadians are not very engaged on marine safety related issues, it is not surprising that few are familiar with the Oceans Protection Plan. While a slight majority report some degree of familiarity with the Oceans Protection Plan, only 12% are very or somewhat familiar with the plan. Among those with some degree of familiarity, only 6% have seen, read, or heard about the plan in the past year. Those who have seen, read, or heard something recall the primary action points of the Oceans Protection Plan such as increasing protection of the oceans and waterways and protecting the marine ecosystem and habitat. Key sources of information on the Oceans Protection Plan are television and newspapers, with some mentions of radio, social media, and Transport Canada or other government websites.

Despite having low awareness of the Oceans Protection Plan, a large majority of Canadians still believe the regulations, initiatives and actions of the Oceans Protection Plan are important. Canadians especially believe that timely response to and management of factors that impact marine pollution, as well as protection and restoration of the marine environment are important. Other aspects of the plan involving marine safety, scientific research, and collaboration with multiple cohorts of Canadians on marine safety initiatives are important to 61% to 67% of Canadians.

Between one-third to half (35% to 50%) of the public perceive a positive impact of the Oceans Protection Plan in improving marine safety and safeguarding the marine environment. However,

many (35% to 42%) do not know enough to provide a rating. Expectedly, higher familiarity with the Oceans Protection Plan elicits a distinctly elevated perceived positive impact of the Oceans Protection Plan on various marine safety aspects compared to those who are less familiar or unaware.

Coastal communities in Canada exhibit somewhat higher levels of familiarity with the Oceans Protection Plan than non-coastal communities. Likewise, they are somewhat more likely to consider all the aspects of the Oceans Protection Plan tested to be important. Between 37% to 52% of people in coastal communities are more likely to observe positive impacts of the plan on the various aspects of marine safety and environmental rehabilitation.

Indigenous Peoples are more likely to report being very or somewhat familiar with the Oceans Protection Plan than the public. This is primarily driven by a notably higher degree of familiarity with the plan among Indigenous coastal communities. Indigenous Peoples who have seen, read, or heard about the plan in the past year cite television as their primary source and are much more likely to receive information from social media than the public, especially YouTube. Their views on the importance of most aspects of the Oceans Protection Plan resemble those of the public. However, they are notably more invested in enhancing marine safety in the Arctic and including more meaningful participation from their community, as well as other Canadians than the public. Furthermore, this cohort is somewhat more likely to observe positive impacts of the Oceans Protection Plan.

Indigenous partners interviewed also express varying levels of understanding of the Oceans Protection Plan, with some finding it challenging to grasp its overarching objectives. In line with the perceived positive impacts of the Oceans Protection Plan among Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous partners also view the Oceans Protection Plan favorably overall, due to its funding levels and efforts made towards essential areas like safety and involvement of Indigenous communities. However, they underscore the necessity for enhancement in various aspects, specifically, the need for the plan to establish clear, cohesive, and measurable objectives, streamline and simplify processes, reduce consultation time, tackle turnover in government personnel and sustainable engagement.

Marine stakeholders have a basic understanding of the Oceans Protection Plan, seeing it as a broad set of funding initiatives to enhance marine safety, protect the environment, and promote economic development. They recognize Indigenous partnerships as essential components of the Oceans Protection Plan, with a focus on collaboration and inclusion. While stakeholders praise the Oceans Protection Plan's commitment and investment in marine safety, like Indigenous partners they too criticize the lack of clear strategic objectives and slow implementation. Suggestions for improvement include strengthening engagement with communities, making the engagement process more effective, investing in technology, and being more transparent.

Roles in Developing and Addressing Marine Safety

The majority of Canadians desire strong involvement from the Government of Canada and their provincial or territorial government in developing marine safety. There is a significantly higher expectation – from about 76% of the public – for the federal government to play a much larger and pivotal role in marine safety. However, the proportion of Canadians (37%) who believe the federal government has significantly contributed to addressing marine safety in recent years falls significantly short of the public's expectation.

Similarly, 59% prefer their provincial or territorial government to assume a larger role in marine safety but only 23% believe they have played a substantial role. 45% prefer Indigenous governments to play a significant role. To note, this was expressed more strongly by 61% of Indigenous Peoples. However, only 19% of the public and 32% of Indigenous Peoples feel Indigenous governments have made a substantial contribution. In contrast, only 34% expect a substantial role to be played by their municipal or local government.

Similar to views expressed by marine stakeholders and Indigenous partners, coastal communities also feel somewhat more positively about the Government of Canada's contribution in addressing marine safety. Indigenous coastal communities are more likely to feel all levels of governments, including the shipping industry, have made at least somewhat substantial contributions.

Extent and Importance of Involvement in Canada's Marine Safety System

A large majority of Canadians claim to not be actively involved with marine safety. This is not surprising given the low awareness of the marine safety systems, including the Oceans Protection Plan. That said, despite limited engagement, Canadians prove themselves to be environmental advocates – they feel strongly about marine safety giving it high importance, and feel it is important to receive information as well as provide input on marine safety issues in Canada.

Approximately one in five (19%) Canadians claim they are at least somewhat actively involved in Canada's marine safety system, with 34% of Indigenous Peoples residing in coastal areas reporting active involvement.

The proportion of Canadians searching for information on marine safety has declined from 19% to 24% in previous years to 13% at present. This offers a partial explanation for the declining level of familiarity with marine safety issues. Although coastal Indigenous communities have more interest in this topic, their likelihood to search for information on marine safety is also declining.

Despite very few searching for information about marine safety, the majority of Canadians believe it is highly important for the Government of Canada to provide information on aspects of marine safety, with interest highest on the incidence of accidents/spills and the record of cleaning up spills. It is noteworthy that those who are less familiar with the Oceans Protection Plan are more likely to be interested in these pieces of information.

Along with receiving information, Canadians also feel that providing input on decisions the government makes with regards to marine safety is important to them. Indigenous Peoples, and especially those in coastal areas, are much more likely to feel it is important. This sentiment is reinforced by Indigenous partners, as they expect the government to increase and maintain consultations with Indigenous communities.

Sources of Information about GoC's Programs & Initiatives on Marine Safety

The majority of respondents prefer searching the internet (78%), with a significant portion also relying on Government of Canada websites (49%) for information on government programs and initiatives on marine safety. Only a few mention seeking information from other sources like non-government organizations, individuals working in the marine transportation or shipping industries and social media. Coastal communities and Indigenous Peoples have similar source preferences as the public.

Participation in Engagement Sessions

Few Canadians actively search for information or are involved with marine safety. Consistent with these findings, only 4% of Canadians report participating in an engagement session on marine safety or the Oceans Protection Plan. These results are consistent with results from previous years. Most who participated say these sessions were organized by the Government of Canada, with some mentioning other organizers like environmental groups and their provincial or local governments.

Notably, participation by coastal communities (5%) and Indigenous Peoples (5%) in these sessions is almost similar to the public's and slightly lower than reported in previous years. Among Indigenous Peoples, it is primarily only those residing in coastal areas who say they have participated.

Indigenous partners and marine stakeholders hold very similar opinions regarding consultation preferences. Both groups largely prefer in-person meetings or sessions because it helps foster trust, increase engagement, and allows the amount of overwhelming information on marine safety and the Oceans Protection Plan to be distilled down through dialogue and discussions. That said, ultimately for marine stakeholders the quality of the interaction is deemed more important than the method of consultation, with a call for more engaging and purposeful discussions.

Indigenous partners suggest that the government should increase community engagement and follow up to show how this community input is being incorporated in decisions on marine safety and in the Oceans Protection Plan. There should be assurances of long-term commitment to the Oceans Protection Plan, which involves providing summaries of the Oceans Protection Plan projects, and clarifying that the Oceans Protection Plan is not exclusive to coastal communities.

D. Note to Readers

Detailed findings are presented in the sections that follow. Overall results for the 2024 survey are presented in the main portion of the narrative and are typically supported by graphic or tabular presentation of results and labelled as “2024”. Results are compared, where applicable, with the 2022, 2020 and 2018 survey findings, and are presented in tables under the heading “2022”, “2020” and “2018”. Where there are significant differences between the public, Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities, these differences are described in the main paragraph.

Bulleted text is used to point out any statistically and substantively significant differences between sub-groups. If differences are not noted in the report, it can be assumed that they are either not statistically significant* in their variation from the overall or that the difference was deemed to be substantively too small to be noteworthy.

Results may not total to 100% due to rounding.

**Chi-square and standard t-tests were applied as applicable. Differences noted were significant at the 95 % level.*

E. Political Neutrality Certificate

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I hereby certify as a representative of Pollara Strategic Insights Inc. that the final deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

Signed:

Date: March 27, 2024



Dan Arnold, Chief Strategy officer
Pollara Strategic Insights