



# An Investigation into Constraints to Sustainable Vehicle Ownership: A Focus Group Study

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Although pro-environment sentiments are common among Americans, a gap persists between their attitudes and their behavior when it comes to buying cars and light duty trucks for private use. Consumers often purchase

vehicles that poorly reflect or even contradict their environmental attitudes. This attitudes-behavior gap has important public policy implications because of the extensive environmental impacts and energy demand that result from owning and using private vehicles.

## Study Method

This study explored the gap between environmental attitudes and vehicle purchase behavior using a series of four focus group conversations with 36 participants who were selected for their pro-environment attitudes. The sessions were held in the Sacramento, California, metropolitan region in 2009.

The group conversations explored three key questions:

1. To what extent do people perceive that their vehicle ownership reflects their environmental attitudes?
2. What barriers and constraints do people perceive to aligning their environmental attitudes with their vehicle ownership choices?
3. What changes in personal circumstances and travel options would permit them to bring their vehicle ownership more closely in line with their environmental attitudes?

## Findings

Pro-environmental concerns were only rarely important to focus group participants in their most recent vehicle purchases, whether they bought a new or used car or light duty truck. Barely one in ten considered the impact on the natural environment of their choice. For the rest, other vehicle purchase factors such as cost, safety, comfort, and functional preferences proved to be so important that environmental impacts were never directly considered. *Indirectly*, energy efficiency was a concern to about half of the participants, but only because better mileage represented desired cost savings.

Participants explained this discrepancy in terms of constraints that they believed prevented them from buying “greener” (higher fuel efficiency, lower emissions) vehicles. The high cost of hybrid vehicles (the only type that most participants considered “green”), their unfamiliarity with newer technologies, family and work responsibilities and hard-to-change habits were the constraints they most often cited.

**... participants were constrained in their vehicle choices by cost, family and work responsibilities, and other factors, including misinformation and uncertainty about the environmental impacts of owning cars and light duty trucks.**

The focus groups also revealed that participants were constrained in their vehicle choices by misinformation and uncertainty about the environmental impacts of owning cars and light duty trucks. Most participants acknowledged that their vehicles affect the natural environment negatively, but they were uncertain as to what the impacts are and how these relate to vehicle makes and models.

***... the extensive environmental impacts of owning vehicles could be mitigated if consumers were presented with accurate information and good reasons to choose smaller and more energy-efficient vehicles.***

## **Policy Recommendations**

The study findings suggest two broad strategies to encourage more people to choose vehicles with lower environmental impacts. Further research is needed to test whether these study findings hold true for larger populations.

### **Help make fuel efficient, low emission vehicles a desirable choice**

To make greener vehicles desirable to consumers, manufacturers, policy-makers and planners all have important roles to play. Manufacturers should produce fuel efficient, low emissions vehicles that are affordable and reflect the functional and performance factors important to consumers. Planners and policy-makers can provide incentives to purchase these vehicles with feebate programs, parking, vehicle registration, and insurance policy changes, and revised CAFE standards, motor fuel taxes, and “gas-guzzler” surcharges. In the longer run, they need to use land use planning to promote lower mileage lifestyles that encourage fewer and more energy efficient vehicle purchases.

### **Help consumers integrate knowledge about the environmental impacts of vehicles into their vehicle purchase decisions**

Educating consumers about the link between vehicle ownership and the natural environment is a significant challenge that requires providing accurate information about the environmental impacts of vehicles during the purchasing process, as this could influence some consumers’ choice of vehicles. Even for those people who are unconcerned about how their vehicle impacts the natural environment, accurate information about the costs of fuel inefficiency could lead to more environmentally responsible choices.



### **About the Authors**

Dr. Bradley Flamm is Assistant Professor of Community and Regional Planning at Temple University in Ambler, Pennsylvania and Dr. Asha Weinstein Agrawal is Director of MTI’s National Transportation Finance Center.

### **To Learn More**

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2903.html](http://transweb.sjsu.edu/project/2903.html)