

Greener Than You! Boomers, Gen X & Millennials Score Themselves On The Environment



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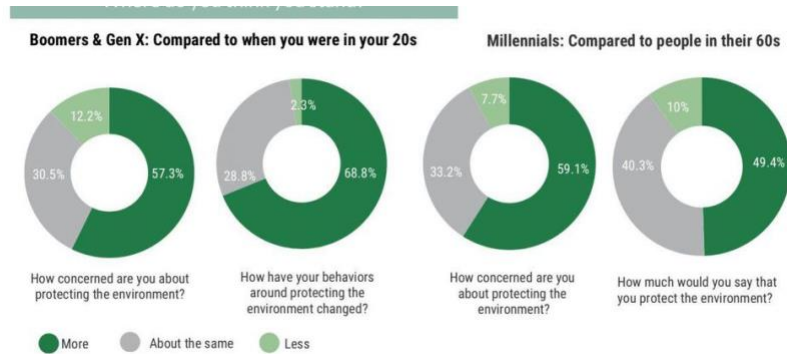
Women with protest signs at rally for Science on Earth Day, 22 April 2017, in Tucson, Arizona, USA. (Photo by: Wild Horizons/UIIG via Getty Images)

The Baby Boomers are being blamed for [just about everything](#). Americans born between 1946 – 1964, the Boomers, are in the crosshairs of commentators eager to pin them for all sorts of societal ills, including [failing to take action](#) and exercise stewardship of the environment.

One zealous writer goes so far as to label the Boomers “[a generation of sociopaths](#)” laden with “a ton of maladaptive personality characteristics,” not least because of their political unwillingness to address climate change. A harsh diagnosis describing more than 70 million people.

But Boomers may not feel that way about themselves. They are, after all, the generation that came of age in the years that included the publication of *Silent Spring* and the passage of the Clean Air Act —arguably around the founding of the modern environmental movement itself. As college students, Boomers celebrated the first ever Earth Day in 1970. Retiring Boomers and Gen X'ers may have a new job in retirement - a renewed environmental activism.

To better understand environmental attitudes across generations, the [MIT AgeLab](#) conducted a nationwide survey that asked Millennials (born between 1980 – 2000) how they perceived their environmental attitudes and behaviors relative to the older generations. And we asked Boomers and Gen Xers (the later born between 1965-79) to compare their attitudes and behaviors to their younger selves.



Baby Boomer, Gen X & Millennial perceptions of their commitment to the environment compared to other generations.

A majority of Millennials believed that they were more concerned than the older generations about protecting the environment. At the same time, though, a majority of adults who comprise those older generations (Boomers and Gen X) saw themselves as more environmentally minded than when they were in their twenties. Even if the rap on Boomers and the environment has gone bad, the Boomers don't see themselves that way.

Perspective is one thing, though; behavior is another. Studies show that merely believing in the importance of protecting the environment doesn't actually translate into pro-environmental activity - at any age. Yossi Sheffi, the Director of MIT's [Center for Transportation and Logistics](#) and author of "[Balancing Green: When to Embrace Sustainability in a Business \(and When Not To\)](#)," points out that in the checkout line, we don't tend to put our money where our environmental mouths are, regardless of age. Sheffi writes, "Although a number of surveys show that most consumers say they want sustainable products, sales data show that only a small percentage are actually willing to pay more to buy sustainable products." The same may well be the case in the voting booth.

But there are other venues where graying adults might be more willing to show their green streak, such as when investing: the AgeLab findings may help explain the fast-growing level of interest in [ESG investments](#), which have grown by more than 97 percent in the last 20 years. ESG investments are those that take into account the environmental and social impact of companies in the process of investing.



Donna Stolz, a member of the board of directors of the Rachel Carson Trails Conservancy, picks up trash from the roadside along a portion of the trail named for the ecologist author of "Silent Spring" on Earth Day, Saturday, April 22, 2017, in Springdale, Pa., where Carson was born. "Silent Spring", written in 1962, is considered by many to have ignited the environmental movement. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic)

Boomers and Gen Xers entering retirement have another way of making an environmental impact outside of their wallets: volunteering. According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), older Gen X and Baby Boomers perform a significant portion of volunteer work, which means at the atomic level of environmental action—cleaning riverbanks, scrubbing bird feathers, rescuing sea turtles—is often in the hands of older adults. With Boomers poised to have a lot more time on their hands in the coming decades, they will have the opportunity to show their commitment and leave a very personal stamp on the environment.

In the minds of today's younger environmental activists, Americans aged 45 and older may be seen as committing unforgivable environmental sins over past decades. But if the data are telling the truth, then the environment may be less a theatre of generational warfare than an opportunity to find common ground. In today's [Longevity Economy](#), the outsized power of older adults as voters, consumers, investors and volunteers might just be the catalyst and be the best hope we have for a more sustainable society in the coming century.