

# MASS MEDIA

## PRESS COVERAGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS IN KYRGYZSTAN AND THE ROLE OF ECO-NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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### ABSTRACT

**T**his article explores obstacles and conditions that environmental nongovernmental organizations face in interacting with media outlets in Kyrgyzstan. It also examines the limited scope of environmental journalism and the resulting limited ability of news outlets and eco-NGOs to help set the public agenda for discussion of policy and is-

sues in the country. Even if such public relations interaction occurs, it is rarely effective and rarely generates influential eco/environmental articles in the media. The study is based on a content analysis of the news agency 24.kg and the newspaper Vecherniy Bishkek. It includes results of a survey and interviews with eco-NGOs representatives.

**KEYWORDS:** *environmental journalism; Kyrgyzstan; environmental NGOs; media coverage; public relations.*

## *Introduction*

If we examine coverage of environmental issues in Kyrgyzstan's news media, we find that it is minimal in relationship to the country's serious environmental and ecological problems, including water quality, air pollution, habitat destruction, climate change and glacial melt, and deforestation. There are more than 350 registered local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) dealing with the environmental situation in the country. However, this study found that only six of those based in the capital city, Bishkek, were engaged in regular activities, had financial support, and were involved in projects during the study period. Even those eco-NGOs had not formed strong networks that could influence government, prompt citizen engagement in environmental problems, and serve as an effective lobbying force.

Many Western media organizations carry regular editorials, columns, and news coverage, as well as employ specialized journalists who report on the ecological situation in every, or in almost every, issue. Those articles do not necessarily carry a negative message or criticism. For example, they often report on "positive" developments such as the birth of an endangered species in a zoo. In contrast, no media outlets in Kyrgyzstan regularly provide columns, broadcast series, or radio programs dedicated to environmental issues. However, that shortcoming does not imply there are no environmental problems in the country. To the contrary, such problems range from pollution to climate disruption to industrial and mining waste to habitat destruction.

The media is indisputably a powerful entity that influences public perceptions. However, it seems from this study that eco-NGOs in Kyrgyzstan do not take this obvious fact into consideration when carrying out their activities. The resulting absence of coverage is crucial because if citizens lack information about environmental issues, they cannot take action to prevent or solve ecological problems.

## **Research Question**

Why do media outlets rarely or never publish eco-related articles, especially on controversial environmental topics. Press releases seem to be one of the most popular ways that NGOs communicate, or can communicate, with editors and other journalists.

Thus, the research question: How do Bishkek-based eco-NGOs attempt to influence press coverage of environmental issues by Bishkek-based media organizations?

Based on agenda-setting theory under which eco-NGOs could shape press coverage that affects how citizens, policymakers, and other media outlets determine priorities on topics of public concern, this study considers communication between journalists and eco-NGOs as a potentially major agenda-builder.

## **Prior Research**

The study is based on the agenda-setting theory of mass communication and how it is influenced in the public sphere by information subsidies such as press releases. This theory describes the power-

ful influence that news media wield by telling the public what issues are important.<sup>1</sup> As for the interaction between the theory and information subsidies from public relations activities, Kiouisis *et al.* explained: “From an agenda-building perspective, the interplay of source, media, and public agendas is of paramount concern. The role of political public relations efforts has been deemed crucial to the process of agenda-building...”<sup>2</sup> In addition, this theory underscores two basic assumptions about agenda-setting research:

1. The press and media do not reflect reality; they filter and shape it.
2. Media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, as Stone *et al.* observed, “the public agenda cannot be expected to exactly mirror the media agenda.”<sup>4</sup>

Some scholars divide the relevant theory into two main steps: agenda-setting and agenda-building. According to Weaver and Elliott, “the focus is on how the press interacts with other institutions in society to create issues of public concern. This agenda-building approach is more concerned with how issues originate, or how subjects of news coverage become issues, than with the media audience relationship studied so often by agenda-setting researchers.”<sup>5</sup>

Agenda-building is one of the main goals of public relations specialists, and every company or organization that wants to deal with the public needs a public relations specialist. Thus, in the book *Managing for the Environment*, the authors write: “A wealth of research has shown precisely how important the media can be in affecting public opinion. Consequently, only the most fool-hardy manager dealing with environmental management issues would think it is unimportant to understand how, why, and with what managerial consequences the print and electronic media help frame environmental issues today. Nor would she underestimate how important media coverage of the environment and her organization’s related activities can be to destroying, maintaining, or rebuilding the public’s trust in her organization.”<sup>6</sup>

The theory has been studied only on a limited basis in international settings concerning the influence of public relations-related activities to coverage of environmental news. For example, Moon and Shim<sup>7</sup> examined the role that press releases played as an agenda-builder in South Korea’s largest environmental conflict, the Saemangeum land reclamation project. Their study showed a relationship between media coverage and press releases in the context of agenda-building. Moreover, it found that the “mention of demonstrations in press releases had a significant influence on the favorability of news coverage, even in a conservative newspaper.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See: M.E. McCombs, D.L. Shaw, “The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media,” *Public Opinion Quarterly*, No. 36 (2), 1972, pp. 176-187; G. Stone, M. Singletary, V.P. Richmond, *Clarifying Communication Theories: A Hands-on Approach*, Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> S. Kiouisis, J.M. Park, J.Y. Kim, E. Go, “Exploring the Role of Agenda-Building Efforts in Media Coverage and Policymaking Activities of Healthcare Reform,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 90, No. 4, 2013, pp. 653-654.

<sup>3</sup> See: University of Twente, “Agenda-Setting Theory,” available at [[http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Public%20Relations,%20Advertising,%20Marketing%20and%20Consumer%20Behavior/Agenda-Setting\\_Theory.doc](http://www.utwente.nl/cw/theorieenoverzicht/Theory%20clusters/Public%20Relations,%20Advertising,%20Marketing%20and%20Consumer%20Behavior/Agenda-Setting_Theory.doc)].

<sup>4</sup> G. Stone *et al.*, op. cit., p. 232.

<sup>5</sup> D. Weaver, S.N. Elliott, “Who Sets the Agenda for the Media? A Study of Local Agenda-Building,” *Journalism Quarterly*, No. 62 (1), 1985, pp. 87-94, 88; S. J. Moon, J.C. Shim, “How Environmental Activists Built a Media Agenda and Its Attributes: The Saemangeum Project in South Korean,” *Korean Social Science Journal*, Vol. 37 (2), 2010, pp. 51-80.

<sup>6</sup> R. O’Leary, R.F. Durant, D.J. Fiorino, P.S. Weiland, *Managing for the Environment*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> See: S. J. Moon, J.C. Shim, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

Another study, *The Production and Consumption of Environmental Meanings in the Mass Media: A Research Agenda for the 1990s*, made the case for an agenda of geographic research based on the mass media of communications. The author found that the media are an integral part of a complex cultural process through which environmental meanings are produced and consumed. The study showed how “environmental meanings are encoded in different forms of media texts and decoded by the different groups who comprise the audiences. It contended that physical and human geographers could usefully collaborate in research with both producers and consumers of media texts, so as to better understand contemporary discourses about human-environment relations.”<sup>9</sup>

Bendix and Liebler examined geographic variations in newspaper coverage of a controversy about protecting northern spotted owls and old-growth forests in the Pacific Northwest of the United States. The study addressed: “the extent to which newspaper ‘framing’ of the conflict favored one side or the other; how coverage varied among newspapers published in different cities around the country; and the extent to which that variation was related to other characteristics of the newspapers’ locations.”<sup>10</sup> Their findings showed that “understanding of media coverage has much to gain from a geographic perspective, because both the environment and attitudes have long history of study in geography, chosen to specifically address environmental news.”<sup>11</sup>

Studies closely related to this article include ones focused on Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>12</sup> The most recent examined news coverage of transborder environmental issues in the Ferghana Valley and was based on in-depth interviews with journalists in two cities in Kyrgyzstan and two cities in Tajikistan based on in-depth interviews with representatives from eco-NGOs and news agencies. Interviewees identified major obstacles to coverage of such issues: avoidance of controversy; self-censorship; limited access to information; lack of collaboration; insufficient professional skills; and weak minority-language media.

For the 2011 study of Kyrgyzstan, the author interviewed respondents in Bishkek, Karakol, and Naryn to answer two research questions: How do domestic eco-NGOs seek to influence domestic press coverage? How do domestic environmental news outlets cover environmental issues and what major factors influence their coverage? The research examined cooperation among eco-NGOs, government, and press outlets, as well as the role and societal position of media, their dependence on government, pressures they face, and the small number of independent, private, or oppositional media outlets.

A study by Pugachev showed problems in collaboration between government and health NGOs in Kyrgyzstan. Although it did not directly address eco-NGOs, similar problems in collaboration between the two sectors were clear.<sup>13</sup>

## Methods

Eco-NGOs have the potential to disseminate important ecological-related messages to the public and, thus, help set and build the agenda for public, media, and governmental discussion. This study

<sup>9</sup> J. Burgess, “The Production and Consumption of Environmental Meanings in the Mass Media: A Research Agenda for the 1990s,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 1990, p. 143.

<sup>10</sup> J. Bendix and C.M. Liebler, “Place, Distance, and Environmental News: Geographic Variation in Newspaper Coverage of the Spotted Owl Conflict,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, No. 89 (4), 1999, p. 658.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 673.

<sup>12</sup> See: E. Freedman, “Barriers to Coverage of Transborder Environmental Issues in the Ferghana Valley of Central Asia,” *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, No. 13, 2014, pp. 48-55; *idem*, “Environmental Journalism in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan: Reporting Scarce Amid Environmental and Media Problems,” *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, No. 10, 2011, pp. 16-134.

<sup>13</sup> See: A. Pugachev, *Cooperation between Government and Health NGOs in Kyrgyzstan*, Lecture at American University of Central Asia Social Research Center, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, 2007.

uses three methods—content analysis, a survey, and interviews conducted by the lead author—to explore this potential.

### **Content Analysis**

This study is based on a content analysis of articles from the online news outlet *24.kg* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* newspaper for six months, from January through July 2010. *24.kg* is one of the most popular online news agencies in Kyrgyzstan. According to statistics from the LiveInternet service, it averaged around 80,000 daily visitors during the study period. The agency has wide networks of correspondents throughout the country. Stories are quickly translated into English for the English-language version of the website, which allows foreigners to read news about current political, economic, social, and other issues. At the time of the study, *Vecherniy Bishkek* was published five days a week (Monday through Friday). It now appears three days a week.

It is disseminated in all regions of the country and had the biggest circulation among the country's Russian-language newspapers during the study period.

### **Survey Questionnaire and Interviews**

If eco-NGOs complain that media outlets ignore or are ignorant about their messaging, are eco-NGOs themselves responsible? Perhaps one reason lies in poorly written press releases that journalists cannot understand well.

Thus this study incorporates results from a questionnaire sent to representatives of Bishkek-based eco-NGOs about dissemination of information to the media and public about their activities and issues of concern. The purpose of the survey was to examine whether NGO leaders understand the importance of public relations and the agenda-building role of their organizations.

In addition, the study included face-to-face interviews by the lead author with representatives of Bishkek-based eco-NGOs to provide a better understanding of the situation. In-depth interviews are frequently part of qualitative research to produce descriptive and exploratory data for issue-focused research.<sup>14</sup> In-depth interviews have been included in mass media research about environmental issues in Central Asia. For instance, Toralieva interviewed journalists and activists in researching her article about obstacles to environmental reporting in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>15</sup>

## **Findings**

Articles about ecological issues did not appear regularly in *24.kg* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. Moreover, any such articles related mainly to weather and to reports or warnings from the Ministry of Emergency Situations. Thus, during the monitoring it was decided to include only those articles that stated that humans caused certain ecological problems that affected people or could affect people in the future. During the content analysis, only a small number of articles included the perspectives of eco-NGOs.

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<sup>14</sup> See: S.N. Hesse-Biber, P. Leavy, *The Practice of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> See: G. Toralieva, "Environmental Reporting in Kyrgyzstan," *Problems of Post-Communism*, No. 58, 2011, pp. 58-66.

### Content Analysis of News Agency 24.kg

During the six-month study period, 24.kg published sixty-six articles on environmental topic; eco-NGOs initiated eight of the articles, as through a press release or information provided during a press tour organized by the eco-NGO. One article was published under the name of an international agency that monitored pollution of cities worldwide. Among the stories covered: the Kyrgyz capital ranked 16th on the world’s list of most polluted cities; a representative of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) CARNet Project, Jaras Abu Takenov, was interviewed about climate change; the head of the NGO Aleine spoke about agriculture and possible damage from chemicals. Other articles dealt with environmental protection, animals, and renewable energy sources. One article based on remarks by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon discussed tailings in Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, there were six editorials by 24.kg journalists about animals, images of Bishkek, Lake Issyk Kul, floods, and timbering.

Moreover, forty-nine of the sixty-six news were written at the instigation of government agencies, such as the Ministry of Emergency Situations, regional governmental administrations, the National Agency on Environmental Protection, and parliamentary deputies in the Jogorku Kengesh.

Figure 1

Variety and Number of Topics Covered

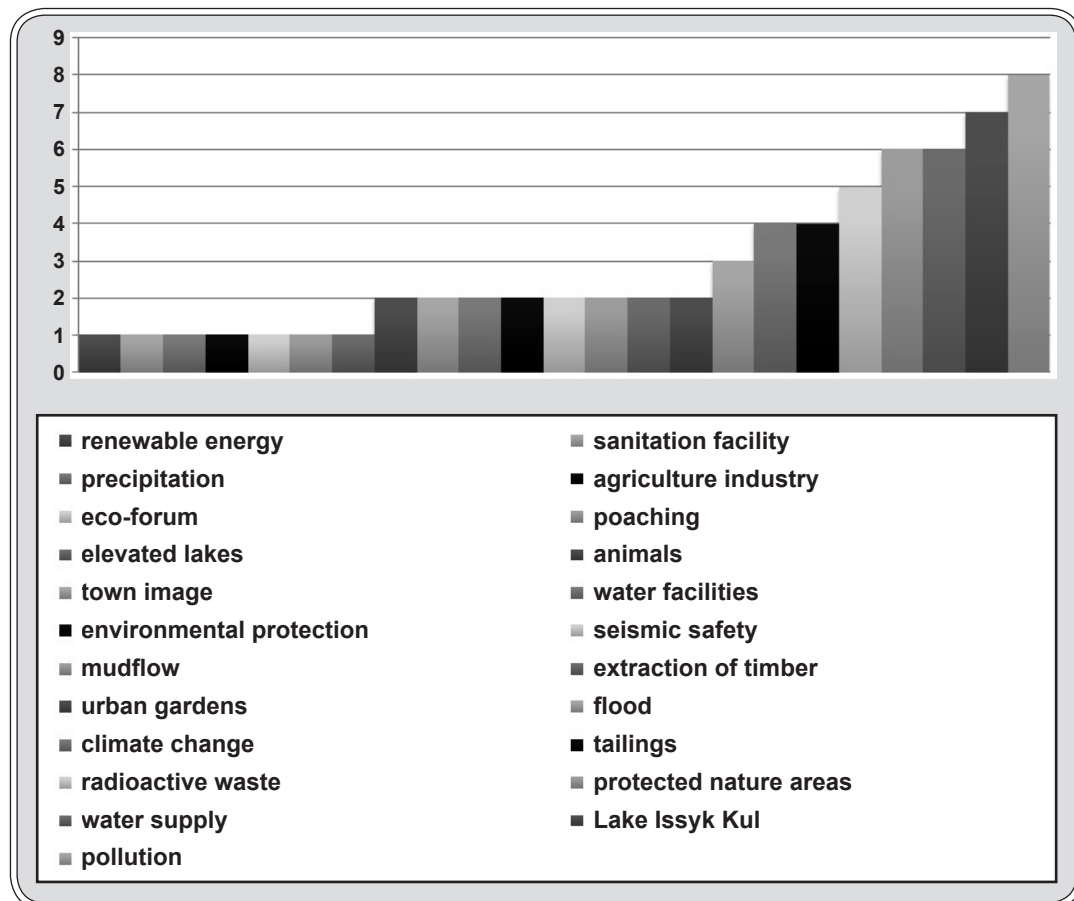
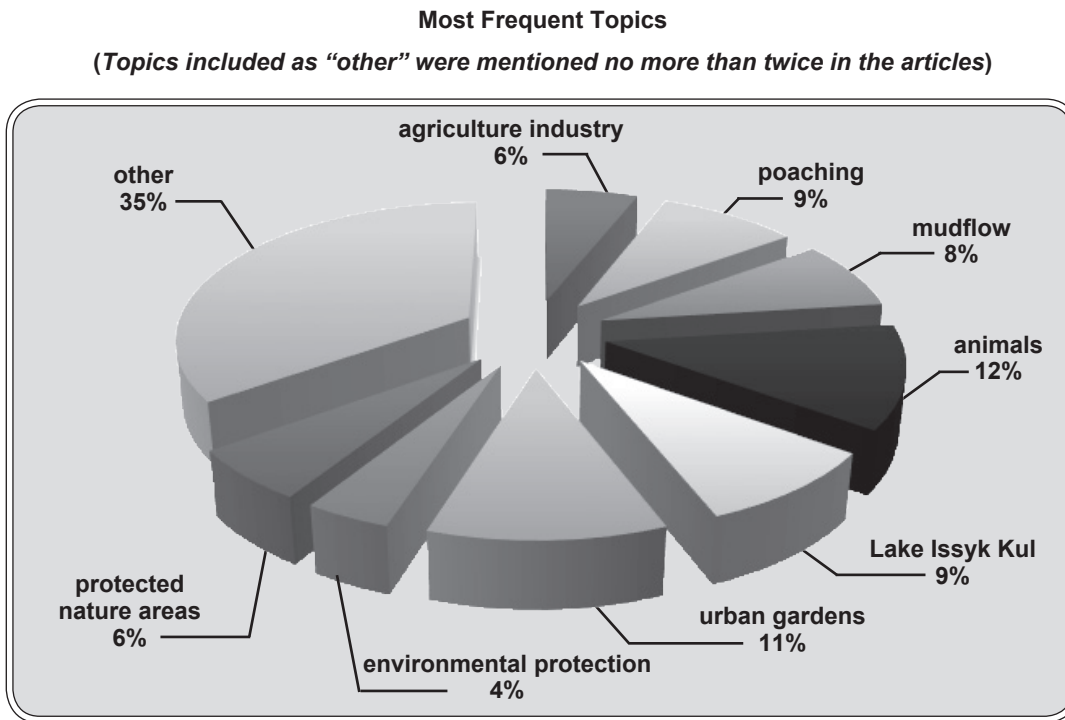
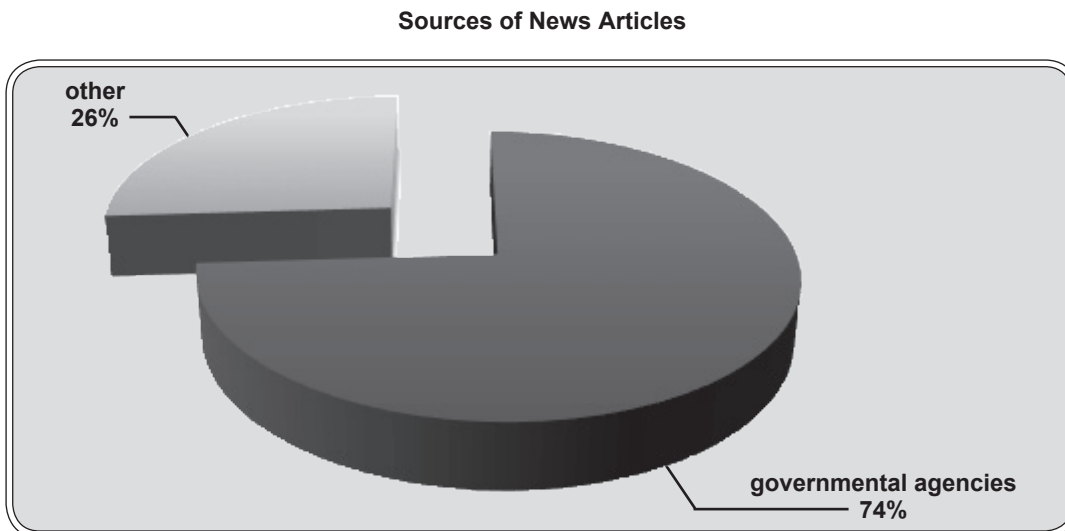


Figure 2



Many sources appeared in environmental news stories, but the leading source was the Ministry of Emergency Situations. These issues were covered mainly by the same journalists who perhaps were assigned to follow a particular governmental body as their beat or as part of their beat. Thus, for example, it is obvious that Bolotbek Kolbaev was assigned to report on fire department news. Aizada Kutueva reported mainly on environmental issues such as special park zones and animals.

Figure 3



## Content Analysis of Vecherniy Bishkek

Fifty-seven eco/environmental articles appeared during the study period. Six articles cited eco-NGOs as sources of information. Two stories, both about renewable energy sources, cited the eco-NGO Biom. Three articles referred to the UNDP CARNet project. Other articles talked about animals, energy efficiency, and waste. One article was written about Lake Issyk Kul, based on data and information from the Asian Development Bank. One article referred to members of the Youth of Naryn initiative group.

Twenty-seven editorials and columns were by the newspaper's own journalists. Nine editorials focused on animals, insects, and birds. Three were about waste. Other environmental topics were covered no more than twice. Twenty-three articles were based on government data: Five were based on data from the National Academy of Science of the Kyrgyz Republic; the Ministry of Emergency Situations and Ministry of Agriculture provided information for two articles each.

The number of editorials and columns in *Vecherniy Bishkek* was higher than in *24.kg*. The content analysis of *Vecherniy Bishkek* found twenty-seven editorials and columns. They were written by different journalists. It was clear that some are interested in the topic since they write eco/envi-

*Figure 4*

**Variety and Number of Covered Topics**

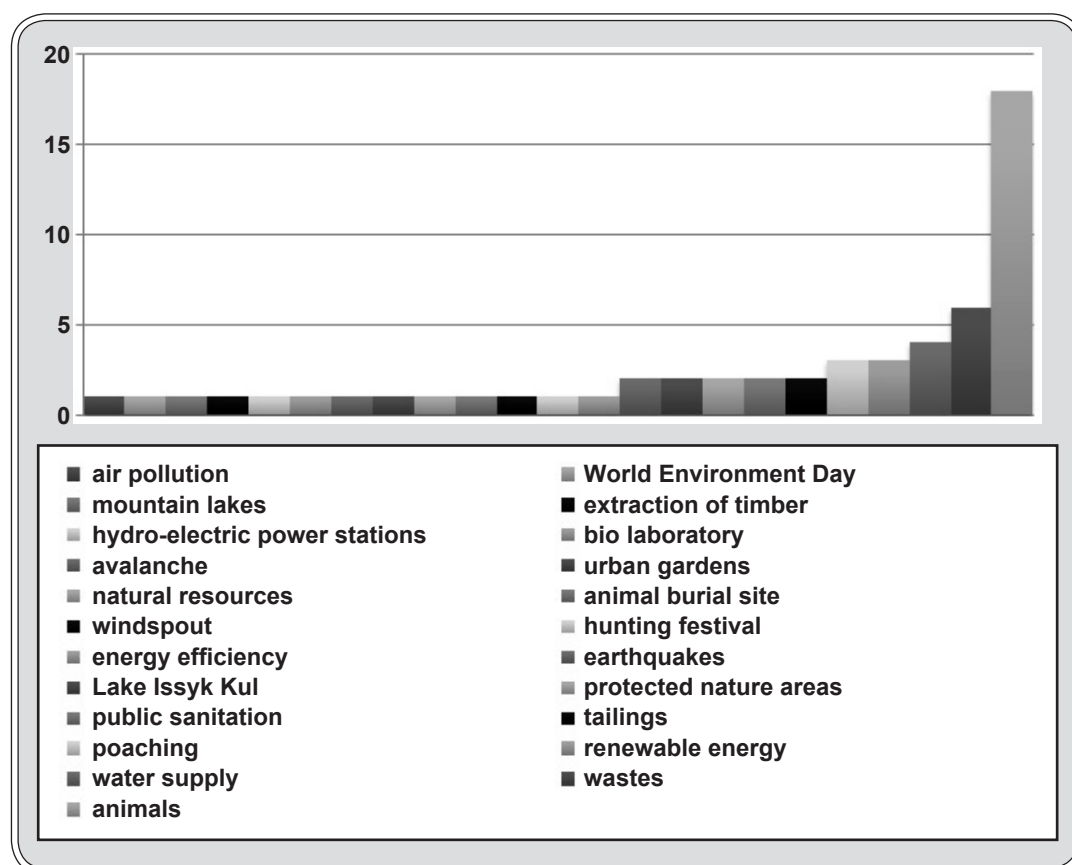




Figure 5

**Most Frequent Topics**  
 (Topics included as "other" were mentioned no more than twice in the articles)

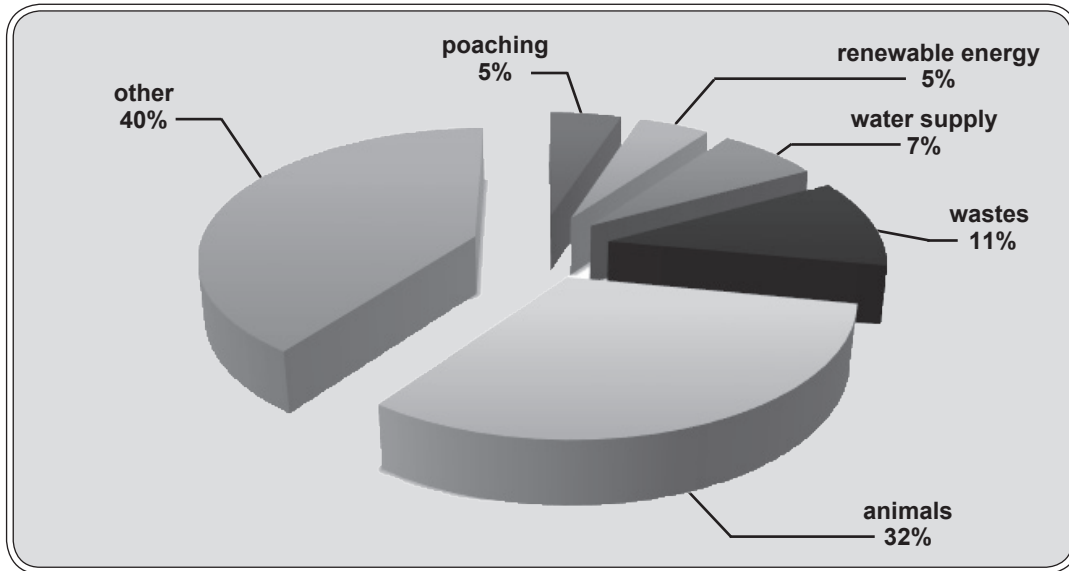
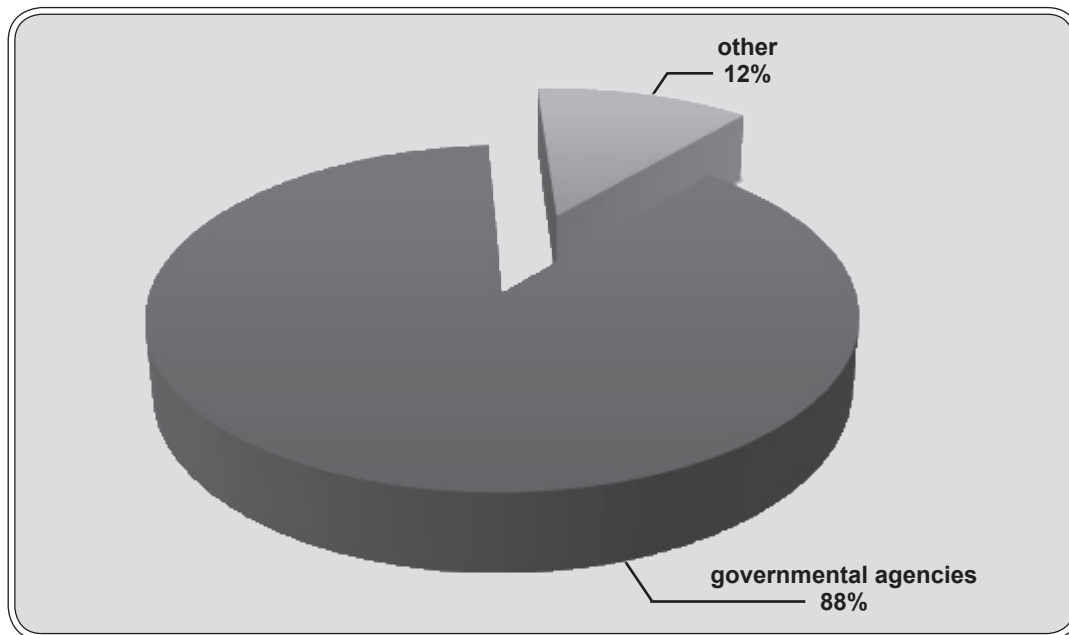


Figure 6

**Sources of News Articles**



mental articles on a regular basis. For example, Anastasiya Khodykina wrote seven articles on eco/environmental issues. However, they were not published regularly: three articles were published in February and four in June.

### Survey Results

This section is based on a survey questionnaire completed by six Bishkek-based eco-NGOs: Ala-Too Camp; Aleine; Ekois; Unison; CARNet; and Biom. The survey consisted of twelve questions

Figure 7

**How Dangerous to Human Life is the Ecological Situation in Kyrgyzstan in Your Opinion?**

(Respondents used a five-point scale: 1 = not dangerous; 2 = not very dangerous; 3 = neither; 4 = dangerous; and 5 = very dangerous)

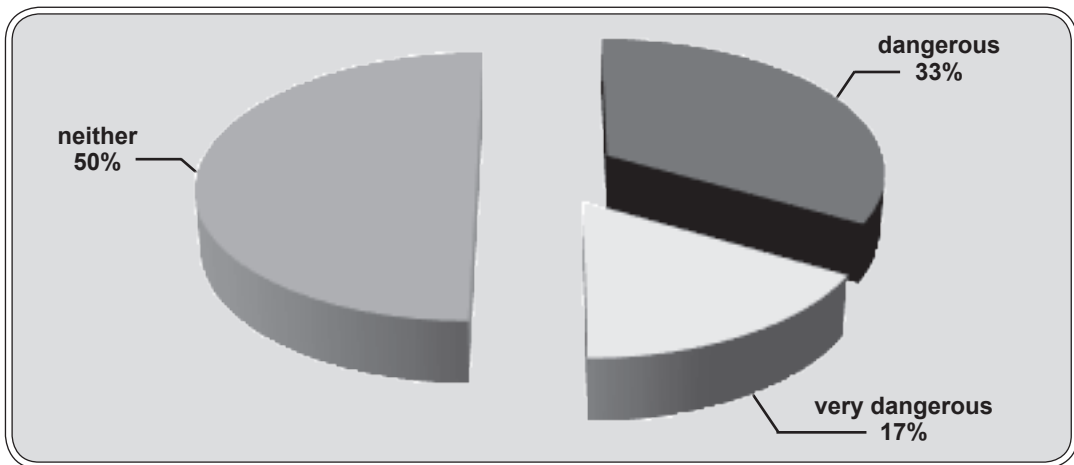


Figure 8

**What are the 3 or 4 Most Important Ecological Problems in the Country That Your Organization is Interested In?**

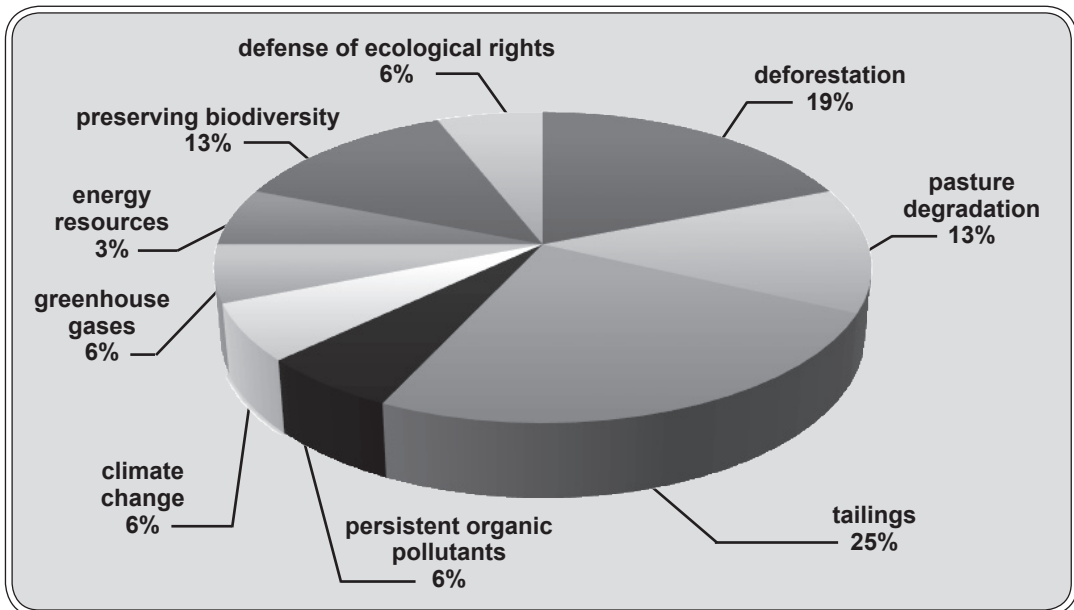
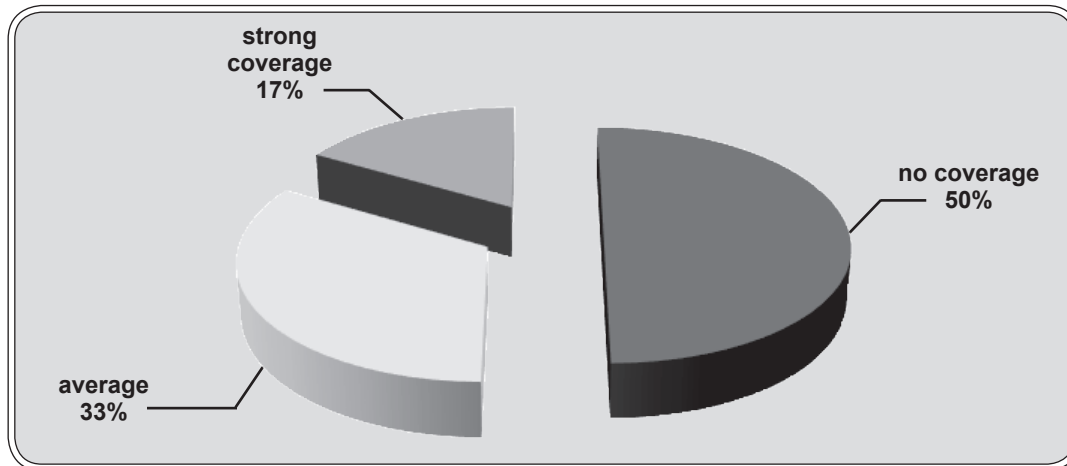


Figure 9

**Do News Media Adequately Cover Environmental Problems in the Region?**

(Respondents used a five-point scale: 1 = no coverage; 2 = weak coverage; 3 = average; 4 = strong coverage; and 5 = very strong coverage)



related to their activities, their connections with the media, and an overall image of the ecological situation in the country.

Twenty-five percent of respondents called mine tailings the most dangerous ecological problem. Nineteen percent identified deforestation as one of the most crucial problems. Pasture degradation and preservation of biodiversity each received 13 percent of responses. Each of the remaining answers, totaling 6 percent, received only one vote each. This finding suggests that such ecological problems as persistent organic pollutants, climate change, greenhouse gases, energy sources, and defense of ecological rights do not occupy a central place in the issue agenda of most Bishkek-based eco-NGOs.

### Interviews

The survey included interviews with the surveyed NGO representatives to allow them to expand on their responses.

Alma Karsymbek, the first interviewee, represented Ala-Too Camp.<sup>16</sup> She coordinates communication projects and exchange programs for the Ala-Too Camp Public Foundation. In the interview, she reported communicating with journalists mostly when they ask her to arrange interviews; however, in the survey she responded that the organization is interested in communication with journalists and that it regularly sends press releases, conducts press conferences, and organizes other events such as media tours for journalists. According to Karsymbek, her NGO's main problem in securing coverage is that many other issues, particularly political ones, seem more interesting to both journalists and the public. She also said only a few journalists are interested in environmental issues. In addition, she said the government does not want to pay attention to these issues because most environmental problems would have to be solved immediately, which would be expensive.

<sup>16</sup> A. Karsymbek, interview, 9 December, 2010, Bishkek.

She named tailings, pasture degradation, and deforestation as the most dangerous ecological problems. Notably, the content analysis of *24.kg* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* found no articles on these issues.

The second interviewee was Professor Emil Shukurov, who chairs the Aleine ecological movement,<sup>17</sup> established in 1994 as one of the first ecological organizations in Kyrgyzstan. According to Shukurov, the main problem of environmental journalism is that articles do not appear on a regular basis. Even when people read them, they are most likely to forget the information from the articles. The audience tends to think that lack of information about such issues indicates the absence of eco/environmental problems in the country, which is untrue. Shukurov said lack of and degradation of forests are the main ecological problems in Kyrgyzstan, and political problems have a crucial influence on the eco/environment. He was one of the first experts who helped develop the Ecological Code for the Constitution in 1993, and he was also invited to develop laws for the 2005 and 2010 constitutional reforms. However, he said corruption plays a huge role, even in eco/environmental legislation. For instance, a person who illegally kills a snow leopard would be fined only 6,000 soms (about \$150).

Another interviewee was Indira Jakipova of Ekois.<sup>18</sup> The NGO has a representative in Karakol, the capital of Issyk Kul region, and many independent journalists from all over the country work for this NGO. Journalists usually write for the organization's website, updating regional eco-news. However, they are rarely paid for their work. Jakipova updates the website and disseminates an ecological digest on a regular basis. In addition, the organization has a bulletin, *Areol*, which provides recent updates about the ecological situation and the organization's achievements. She said journalists mostly cover political problems, leaving eco/environmental issues in the background. Moreover, the unstable political situation has influenced the activities of Ekois, making it difficult to find donors for eco/environmental projects. Thus many eco-NGOs changed their goals to connect their activities with social and health care problems.

The next interview was with Darika Sulaimanova of Unison where she coordinates its Power Sector Management Program.<sup>19</sup> The NGO was established in 2002 and has a representative office in the city of Naryn. According to Sulaimanova, the organization lacks regular connections with media. However, it has created Google groups dedicated to power sector management and climate change. Google groups give it an opportunity to send a biweekly digest to members and it provides a platform to discuss published articles. However, members of the Google groups are mainly people working in the eco/environmental sector, so the information does not necessarily reach ordinary citizens and rarely gets published in the mass media. Unison has broadcast video material on climate change on the Kyrgyz Public TV/Radio Corporation and organized trainings for journalists on environmental journalism.

Sulaimanova said it is necessary to raise people's awareness of eco/environmental issues. Regular columns dedicated to ecology and environment could contribute toward development of better relations among journalists, experts, NGOs, and civil society groups. Moreover, Sulaimanova said ecological problems are not as popular for media coverage as political issues. Therefore, the country's unstable political situation occupies a central place in the media and does not provide opportunities to raise public awareness of ecology. If any ecological topics are covered in the media now, they will lose their value in contrast to the most current issues such as politics and the economy.

In her interview, Irina Chistyakova of the UNDP project on Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development and an editor-analyst of the CARNet network, cited a number of problems with

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<sup>17</sup> E. Shukurov, interview, 13 December, 2010, Bishkek.

<sup>18</sup> I. Jakipova, interview, 12 January, 2011, Bishkek.

<sup>19</sup> D. Sulaimanova, interview, 25 February, 2011, Bishkek.

reporting of eco/environmental issues.<sup>20</sup> According to her, civil society organizations in developing countries are uninterested in ecological problems because they have many other important concerns, such as rising food prices and political and economic instability. Moreover, ecological problems do not appear to have an immediate effect—most such problems in the country are currently not dangerous to human life although they will influence the lives of people decades later. For instance, Chistyakova spoke of radioactive tailings in Tuiuk Suu, which are threatened by landslides and where removal efforts would take at least two years.

According to Chistyakova, one of the crucial problems is the low status of the responsible governmental body, the State Agency for Environmental Protection in Kyrgyzstan. The agency does not have representatives in the parliament and, therefore, does not have influence on governmental decision-making processes. In light of rapid changes in governmental agencies, Chistyakova said the agency's executive board does not focus on long-term plans.

Another problem cited is the absence of a permanent column in any of the news media. *Vecherniy Bishkek* used to have a regular feature called "Ekopolis" by journalist Svetlana Lapteva that was published once every month or two months but without a stable schedule. Chistyakova also noted that most eco-NGOs do not hire public relations specialists who could develop proper relations with media outlets. On the other hand, journalists cannot produce quality eco/environmental articles, due to their lack of skills and understanding of ecological problems, she said. "Journalists often confuse basic environmental terms. The lack of PR specialists also plays its role—sometimes eco-NGOs do not even prepare press releases for their press conferences."

The projects coordinator of Biom, Anna Kirilenko, expressed a different opinion on eco/environmental journalism.<sup>21</sup> She said ecological journalism is improving and the number of journalists reporting about and interested in this sphere is increasing. Moreover, Kirilenko said a number of journalists have become specialists on ecological issues. Kirilenko also noted the historical development of the ecological movement and ecological journalism in Kyrgyzstan. "After the collapse of the Soviet Union, any NGO was perceived as a money-washing machine. The attitude of people toward the activity of eco-NGOs was negative and biased," she said. The ecological movement in Kyrgyzstan has gone through many stages and difficulties. As a consequence, the topics raised by eco-NGOs were perceived negatively. People tend to believe that eco-NGOs are just trying to scare people.

Kirilenko was the only interviewee who questioned the necessity of publishing regular articles in the media. She said Biom has been publishing regular materials in the *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* newspaper. From this experience, she said it is important not to scare the public or cause panic. As she noted, that is what journalistic talent is about—the ability to find balance—and that is something eco/environmental journalism in Kyrgyzstan lacks.

## Analysis of Data

The content analysis found few articles published under the instigation or initiative of eco-NGOs. Only 26 percent of articles on the *24.kg* website and 12 percent of articles in *Vecherniy Bishkek* were written under the initiative of independent, non-governmental entities or journalists themselves (editorials or columns). The most popular topics were the agricultural industry, poaching, mudflows, animals, Lake Issyk Kul, urban gardening, environmental protection, protected natural areas, renewable energy, water supply, and waste. The articles in Fig. 1 eco/environmental topics

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<sup>20</sup> I. Chistyakova, interview, 15 March, 2011, Bishkek.

<sup>21</sup> A. Kirilenko, interview, 4 May, 2011, Bishkek.

were mentioned more than three times with at least three articles on each topic published in both *24.kg* and *Vecherniy Bishkek* during the study period.

In addition, it was noticed that the two media outlets had different agendas. There were a number of issues that were raised only by one of them. For instance, *24.kg* never mentioned air pollution or natural resources during the study period, while *Vecherniy Bishkek* never reported on climate change, radioactive waste, or the agricultural industry that *24.kg* had covered.

The data answered the Research Question: What are the 3 or 4 most important ecological problems in the country that your organization is interested in? NGO representatives listed deforestation, pasture degradation, tailings, persistent organic pollutants, climate change, greenhouse gases, energy resources, biodiversity, and defense of ecological rights. By comparison, the most popular published topics were the agriculture industry, poaching, mudflows, animals, Lake Issyk Kul, urban gardening, protected natural areas, renewable energy sources, water supply, and waste. Table 1 shows the difference.

Table 1

Comparison of Data on Topic Coverage

What are the 3 or 4 most important ecological problems in the country that your organization is interested in?	Topics most covered in both <i>24.kg</i> and <i>Vecherniy Bishkek</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ deforestation</li> <li>■ pasture degradation</li> <li>■ tailings</li> <li>■ persistent organic pollutants</li> <li>■ climate change</li> <li>■ greenhouse gases</li> <li>■ energy resources</li> <li>■ biodiversity</li> <li>■ ecological rights</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ agriculture industry</li> <li>■ poaching</li> <li>■ mudflows</li> <li>■ animals</li> <li>■ Lake Issyk Kul</li> <li>■ urban gardening</li> <li>■ protected natural areas</li> <li>■ renewable energy sources</li> <li>■ water supply</li> <li>■ waste</li> </ul>

This table shows the comparison of answers from eco-NGO representatives and data gathered through the content analysis. The list of most important ecological problems these organizations were interested in differs from the topics covered most often by both media outlets. As a result, we can see that eco-NGO leaders and journalists, and consequently, media-consuming readers, consider the environmental situation of the country differently. What seems most important or newsworthy to one group does not to the other. Therefore, citizens might not be aware of what eco-NGOs regard as the most important ecological problems because journalists do not report about them.

Shukurov, of Aleine, said in his interview that some journalists are not motivated or interested in reporting on certain topics unless they get paid for it. However, based on the data collected for the content analysis, it is clear that media outlets published environmental articles almost daily on average during the study period, as well as editorials and columns. Shukurov also said his organization communicates with journalists mainly via phone if they call for an expert opinion. However, that is insufficient to develop effective relations and connections with the media.

The representative of Ala-Too, Karsymbek, usually arranges meetings with journalists and experts. However, such meetings do not necessarily lead to coverage of her NGO's activities because journalists could be interested in issues that the NGO is not interested in.

In comparison with those eco-NGOs, Ekois seemed more active in forming relationships with journalists. However, sending them digests and publishing bulletins does not always mean they will read the information. In addition, as Jakipova noted, its digest includes extensive articles about environmental issues elsewhere in Central Asian and other countries, which could be a reason why local journalists are not interested.

Unison's Sulaimanova acknowledged that her eco-NGO has not established regular connections with media although journalists are interested in publishing its materials. This seems inconsistent because the organization has plenty of time to develop necessary links with journalists since its establishment in 2002. The organization has created two Google groups dedicated to Power Sector Management and climate change. However, the number of listed participants is relatively small—132 members in the first group and 113 in the second. Most of the listed participants represent other eco-NGOs and governmental agencies; only a few people from media and journalists are included in the lists. These Google groups do not disseminate the information among ordinary citizens.

As for the UNDP project interviewee, Chistyakova said CARNet's main goal is to raise awareness about civil society related to development of ecological issues. The organization has functioned since 2004 and has representative offices in Central Asian countries as part of a Central Asian network. The network is well developed; however, its contribution in raising people's awareness on the ecological issues is arguable. It is obvious that cooperation within the countries has developed and is seen in terms of the network's activities. However, CARNet is not an information agency and, thus, is not popular among people and ordinary citizens who do not work in the sphere of ecology. Chistyakova said CARNet established relationships with a number of professional journalists and organized competitions and media tours for journalists from Bishkek and other regions of the country; journalists from the regions are more interested in its trainings and seminars than their colleagues from the capital.

Meanwhile, the content analysis found only one article about CARNet's activities. The material was in the form of interview with NGO representative Jaras Abu Takenow and was published on *24.kg* on 5 February, 2010.

Anna Kirilenko, the representative of Biom, said her NGO has developed close relations with journalists that report on the issues of ecology and environment. Kirilenko told that Biom is always trying to take the track of the journalist into consideration. She emphasized that they always provide journalists with special press-kits, even including certain video materials, when they organize special events for the press. During the content analysis, the study found two articles citing Biom, and both were written on the topic of renewable energy sources.

Kirilenko said that "most of the articles on eco/environmental spheres tend to cause the feelings of guilt and anxiety, and they usually lack the information or guidelines on how to deal with the problems or do not have any list of possible ways to overcome such difficulties. Thus, such articles cause the feeling of disgust." According to her, eco-NGOs have to change people's perception of the organizations and ecology itself. She also said journalists should focus more on positive reporting of environment and ecology to encourage the public people to be hopeful and ready to act without waiting for help from government or eco-NGOs. "It is really amazing that people in Kyrgyzstan were able to make two revolutions but cannot keep the streets clean and the residents of certain small regions are not able to fix their water pipes," she said.

## Areas for Future Research

Since environmental journalism is not well-developed in Kyrgyzstan, there is a wide range of questions for future research. They include: What kind of environmental articles are perceived best by the publics? This article examines only two parts of the three-step communication process. The

first is based on the interviews with eco-NGO representatives concerning their understanding of the need to raise public awareness in these issues, as well as the tools they use and measures they undertake toward development of environmental journalism. The second part, based on the content analysis, is examination of how eco-NGOs communicate with media and what environmental topics the media cover. However, this study does not incorporate public perception of environmental issues or of media coverage of those issues. For example, these questions could be researched: How interested are people in environmental issues? What is their perception of eco-NGOs? How do they react to different types of news coverage about environmental issues? How would they like press coverage to change? What would they advise to improve the reporting? In addition, researchers should expand such studies geographically and in terms of media type and language. This article limited its content analysis to two Russian-language news outlets—one online, one in print—based in Bishkek, with no regional media, no radio or television channels, and no media in Kyrgyz.

### *Conclusion*

Among eco-NGOs in Kyrgyzstan, only six of those based in Bishkek were active during the study period; others changed their focus to social issues to qualify for grants. The active ones lacked public relations specialists who could help develop journalists' interest in ecological issues. Despite the multiplicity of serious environmental issues and newsworthy topics for future articles, media coverage of those topics and of eco-NGOs remains small. As eco-NGO representatives emphasized in interviews, ecological issues are not popular topics on the media agenda, while coverage priority focuses on economics and politics. However, economic and ecological issues are interrelated. Karsymbek and Shukurov said media outlets should publish a regular column dedicated to eco/environmental issues, a proposal that suggests that enhancing coverage could make those issues more prominent for decision-makers in government and international organizations.

Even if traditional news media are not covering ecological issues in depth, some websites are dedicated to ecological and environmental problems of Central Asia, and Kyrgyzstan in particular, including [www.caresd.net] and [www.ekois.net]. Another, [www.carecnet.org], was established by the Regional Environmental Center for Central Asia founded by the region's five countries, UNDP, and the European Commission. The news section of that website is updated daily, publishes interviews with experts, and provides information about upcoming trainings, grant opportunities, and workshops. Its major themes are: information and capacity building; climate change and sustainable energy; water initiatives; education for sustainable development; civil society initiatives, and environmental management and policy.

As this study shows, eco-NGOs have not developed effective, ongoing relationships with media outlets and individual journalists, contributing significantly to a lack of coverage. The need to establish a certain common set of ideas and understandings of environmental issues among eco-NGOs, media, is essential.

The study illuminates how eco-NGOs and media outlets have different understandings of the country's most important environmental problems. This also is illustrated by the fact that the two media outlets in the study had different agendas. As noted earlier, "Media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and a media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues."<sup>22</sup> However, these six eco-NGOs did not contribute toward reflecting, filtering, and shaping media outlets' environmental agenda. As a consequence, the public remains unaware of issues that are rarely raised in the press.

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<sup>22</sup> University of Twente, "Agenda-Setting Theory."



It should be acknowledged that two-way communication between eco-NGOs and the media is not an easy process, and “this is especially true, when shared understandings about health, safety, or ecological risk do not exist.”<sup>23</sup> Thus, eco-NGOs and media should develop some common understandings, principles, and issues for the media agenda.

However, these eco-NGOs are not ready to be agenda-builders. The environmental agenda of *Vecherniy Bishkek* and *24.kg* during the study period consisted primarily of topics raised by governmental bodies, with only a small percentage prompted by eco-NGOs. To be more effective in this realm, cooperation among eco-NGOs is one necessary step toward establishing and publicizing their own agendas. They should unite to increase their mutual capacity to become a strong lobbying force that could influence governmental agencies and parliament.

Basing on the findings, we can conclude that eco-NGOs lack an understanding of how to effectively develop relations with media outlets and how to raise public awareness of environmental issues. The content analysis shows that eco-NGOs rarely cooperate with both *24.kg* and *Vecherniy Bishkek*. Although some eco-NGOs conducted seminars for journalists, they acknowledge that many journalists are too busy to participate. Also, most eco-NGOs representatives interviewed acknowledged that their main communication with journalists is limited to press releases and email subscriptions on Google groups or with bulletins. Moreover, information from eco-NGO sources does not always satisfy journalists’ needs. These organizations are unable to demonstrate the newsworthiness of their materials and, as a consequence, most challenging and interesting topics do not reach the attention of media audiences.

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<sup>23</sup> R. O’Leary, R F. Durant, D.J. Fiorino, P.S. Weiland, op. cit.