



1

# PISA 2006 and Students' Performance in Environmental Science and Geoscience

Introduction.....	16
The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) .....	17
▪ PISA, an overview.....	17
▪ Focus on students' science performance.....	19
Environmental science education: A conceptual framework.....	19
Environmental science performance in PISA 2006 .....	20
Organisation of this report.....	21



## INTRODUCTION

Never have the stakes been so high for the role of science education in shaping how people interact with the earth and its environment. The rising importance of the environment as a scientific and public policy topic over the past fifty years has been built around a framework stressing the functional interdependencies between human life and the natural environment. As science about the environment generates even more knowledge, increasingly large proportions of the world's population are challenged to understand and use this knowledge (Kastens and Turrin, 2006; NAS, 2007; Bybee, 2008).

Human activities such as the accumulation of waste, fragmentation or destruction of ecosystems, and depletion of resources have had a substantial impact on the global environment. The *OECD Environmental Outlook to 2030* (OECD, 2008a) identifies climate change, biodiversity loss, ensuring clean water and adequate sanitation for all, and reducing the health impacts of environmental degradation as some of the main global environmental challenges.

Estimates of the costs of inaction on air pollution, for example, are high and include significant impacts on human health (e.g. respiratory illnesses), economic productivity (reduced agricultural yields, polluted freshwater sources, loss of biodiversity) as well as material damages (e.g. heritage damage from acid rain). Species loss can also incur direct economic costs, as seen in the collapse of fish stocks in the North Atlantic (OECD, 2008b). Water shortages and lack of sanitation affect an important part of the world population. Out of the approximately 6.5 billion people on earth, 1.1 billion do not have access to potable water and 2.6 billion people do not have access to improved sanitation. By 2030, the number of people living under severe water stress is expected to increase by more than 1 billion to 3.9 billion people, nearly half the projected world population (OECD, 2009, OECD, 2008a).

In some areas progress has been achieved in recent years, but remaining challenges are a cause for concern. For example, OECD countries have made significant progress to “decouple” toxic air emissions from economic growth in recent decades. Despite the decrease in air emissions per unit of GDP, total emissions from transport remain high and air quality standards have not been met in many parts of the OECD, particularly in urban areas (OECD, 2008c). Good progress has also been made in establishing protected areas, which amount to nearly 17% of total area in OECD countries, up from 14% at the beginning of the decade. However, the share of plants and animals classified as endangered species continues to increase, and the total number of vertebrates in the wild continues to decline in almost all OECD countries (OECD, 2008c).

While discussions over accountability and solutions for major problems associated with environmental issues are ongoing, the role of educated communities in an effort to protect the environment is more straightforward to establish (NSF, 2000). Well-trained geoscientists, biologists, environmental scientists, and environmental policy-makers can play an important role in confronting environmental challenges in every country. Equally important are informed and motivated citizens that understand and can interpret sophisticated scientific theory and evidence and act upon this knowledge.

Of particular importance is learning at an early age, as it can shape the way people approach and interact with the environment that surrounds them. Furthermore, what students learn in school can also impact an entire household; for example, students who learn about recycling can change the habits of their family.

Therefore, those involved in the development of curriculum policy, teacher education, and science education can benefit from a better understanding of what students know about the environment and what their attitudes are towards environmental issues. How much do young adults, at 15 years of age – and therefore approaching the end of compulsory schooling – know about the earth's environment as they face a future in which



achieving planet-wide environmental sustainability is one of the biggest challenges for their generation? How much of what they have learned from school and elsewhere can be applied to this challenge? And what are their attitudes towards specific environmental topics and related socio-economic issues?

In 2006, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) conducted a major study on science knowledge and skills in nearly 60 countries. Focusing on young people's ability to use their knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges, PISA tests students in three domains (reading, mathematics and science) and takes place every three years, with special attention being paid to one of the domains each time. The first study, which took place in 2000, focused on reading literacy. In 2003, PISA concentrated on mathematics literacy, while in 2006 the emphasis was on science. Its initial report, *PISA 2006 Science Competencies for Tomorrow's World* (OECD, 2007), summarised 15-year-old students' competencies across a wide range of scientific knowledge and skills.

This report examines the evidence in PISA 2006 on what 15-year-olds understand about those aspects of science most closely related to the earth's environment, including long-term environmental sustainability, as well as their interest in, awareness of, and opinions about specific environmental issues worldwide. It summarises what students know about the environment and environment-related issues, from where and how this knowledge is gained, the attitudes students have about environmental issues and how the answers to these questions vary according to the characteristics of students and schools.

## THE PROGRAMME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ASSESSMENT (PISA)

### PISA, an overview

PISA is a comprehensive and rigorous international programme that assesses student performance and collects data on student, family and institutional factors that can help explain variations in performance. Decisions about the scope and nature of the assessments and background information are made by leading experts in participating countries and steered jointly by governments on the basis of shared policy-driven interests. Substantial efforts and resources are devoted to achieving cultural and linguistic breadth and balance in the assessment materials. Stringent quality assurance mechanisms are applied in translation, sampling and data collection. As a consequence, the results of PISA have a high degree of validity and reliability, and can significantly improve understanding of the outcomes of education in the world's most economically developed countries, as well as in a growing number of countries in their earlier stages of economic development.

Key features of PISA are:

- *Policy orientation*, with the design and reporting methods determined by the goal of informing policy and practice.
- *Innovative approach to "literacy"*, which is concerned with the capacity of students to use what they have learned and to analyse and reason as they pose, solve and interpret problems in a variety of situations.
- *Relevance to lifelong learning*, which allows PISA to not only assess students' knowledge and skills, but also understand students' motivations to learn, beliefs about themselves and attitudes towards what they are learning.
- *Regularity*, enabling countries to monitor improvements in educational outcomes in the light of other countries' performances.
- *Consideration of student performance alongside characteristics of students and schools*, in order to explore some of the main features associated with educational success.



- *Breadth of geographical coverage*, with the 57 countries participating in the PISA 2006 assessment representing almost nine-tenths of the world economy. Nationally representative samples were drawn, representing 20 million 15-year-olds.

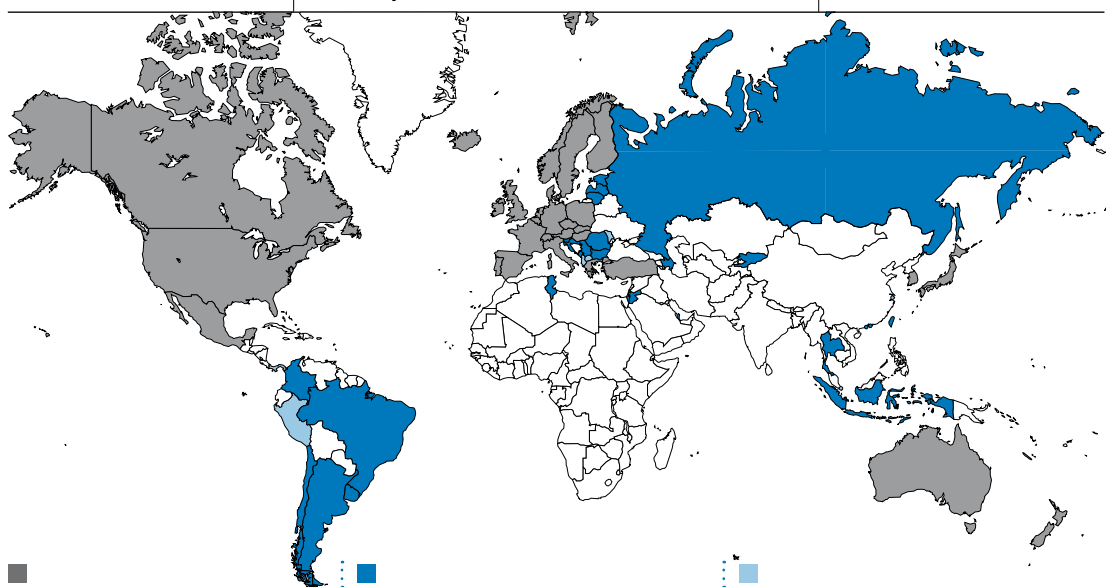
Three PISA surveys have taken place so far, in 2000, 2003 and 2006, focusing on reading, mathematics and science, respectively, but with each domain assessed to some extent in each turn. This sequence will be repeated with surveys in 2009, 2012 and 2015, allowing continuous and consistent monitoring of educational outcomes. Figure 1.1 shows the participating countries and economies in PISA.

Some key innovations of PISA 2006 are related to the environment:

- A profile of student performance in science including environmental science and geoscience.
- Measures of students' attitudes towards learning science and towards environmental issues.
- Measures of school contexts, instruction and activities that promote learning about environmental issues, and parental perceptions of environmental issues.

Figure 1.1

A map of PISA countries and economies



■ **OECD countries**

Australia  
Austria  
Belgium  
Canada  
Czech Republic  
Denmark  
Finland  
France  
Germany  
Greece  
Hungary  
Iceland  
Ireland  
Italy  
Japan  
Korea  
Luxembourg  
Mexico  
Netherlands  
New Zealand  
Norway  
Poland  
Portugal  
Slovak Republic  
Spain  
Sweden  
Switzerland  
Turkey  
United Kingdom  
United States

■ **Partner countries and economies in PISA 2006**

Argentina  
Azerbaijan  
Brazil  
Bulgaria  
Chile  
Colombia  
Croatia  
Estonia  
Hong Kong-China  
Indonesia  
Israel  
Jordan  
Kyrgyzstan  
Latvia  
Liechtenstein  
Lithuania  
Macao-China  
Montenegro  
Qatar  
Romania  
Russian Federation  
Serbia  
Slovenia  
Chinese Taipei  
Thailand  
Tunisia  
Uruguay

■ **Partner countries and economies in previous PISA surveys or in PISA 2009**

Albania  
Shanghai-China  
Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia  
Moldova  
Panama  
Peru  
Singapore  
Trinidad and Tobago



The value of PISA in monitoring performance over time is growing, although it is not yet possible to assess to what extent the observed differences are indicative of longer-term trends. With science being the main assessment area for the first time, results in PISA 2006 provide the baseline for future measures of change in this subject.

### Focus on students' science performance

With more than one half of the assessment time devoted to science, PISA 2006 can report in much greater detail on science performance than was the case in PISA 2000 and PISA 2003. As well as calculating overall performance scores, it is possible to report separately on different science competencies and establish for each performance scale conceptually grounded proficiency levels that relate student performance scores to what students are typically able to do. Students received scores for their capacity in each of the three science competencies (*identifying scientific issues*, *explaining phenomena scientifically* and *using scientific evidence*). Estimates were also obtained at the country level for students' *knowledge about science* (i.e. their knowledge of the processes of science as a form of enquiry) and *knowledge of science* (i.e. their capacity in the science content areas of "Earth and space systems", "Physical systems" and "Living systems").

### ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

One of the main challenges of environmental discourses is to define environmental science and subsequently policies, programmes, and practices for environmental science education. People frequently use environmental education to describe what could also be designated as "environmental information". This includes information that can be acquired from the media, through advertisements, or even in simple story books. Science education, in some instances, can also provide environmental information without necessarily providing environmental education. This section presents a definition of environmental science education that serves as the conceptual basis for this report.

A well-established definition of environmental education was set by Hines, Hungerford and Tomera (1986-87), who stated that environmental education is more than just mere transfer of information. It involves four aspects: a working knowledge of environmental issues, a specific knowledge of approaches to address those issues, the competency to make appropriate decisions, and the possession of certain affective qualities and attitudes that make people care about and pay more attention to environmental conditions.

In 1994, the North American Association for Environmental Education provided a definition of environmental science education that expanded the four aspects used by Hines *et al.* into: environmental and socio-political knowledge, knowledge of environmental issues, cognitive skills and affective qualities, and environmentally responsible behaviour.

More recently, Coyle (2005) equated information to awareness and stated that environmental education "involves a sequenced series of steps that results in a thorough understanding of the subject and its dynamics, including developing skills and learning how to apply them in a real world setting". Coyle (2005) classified environmental awareness into three categories: simple awareness (just knowing of the existence of the issues); personal conduct knowledge (understanding the easy concepts and global ideas); and environmental science literacy (understanding the underlying scientific principles, the skills needed to investigate the subject, and how to use those principles and skills). In this definition, environmental science literacy is considered the highest level outcome of environmental education.

This report describes an empirical approach to measuring aspects of environmental science literacy through an index using PISA 2006 data. The report also includes an in-depth description of a relevant subfield of environmental sciences: Geoscience. A major component of environmental sciences, geoscience focuses



on the structures of earth systems (e.g. lithosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere), energy in earth systems (e.g. sources, global climate), change in earth systems (e.g. plate tectonics, geochemical cycles, constructive and destructive forces), earth in space (e.g. gravity, solar systems), and earth's history (e.g. fossils, origin and evolution). The report presents an index of geoscience performance to provide a deeper understanding of environmental science education within a specific context for countries that participated in PISA 2006.

## ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE PERFORMANCE IN PISA 2006

The development of the PISA 2006 science framework was guided by reference to what science knowledge and skills citizens require (OECD, 2006). Consistent with this guiding principle, the international group of science experts that was appointed by OECD governments decided to include aspects of environmental science and geoscience in the assessment framework. Science knowledge and skills in PISA 2006 are broadly defined in terms of competencies, contexts, knowledge and attitudes. While this framework did not identify environmental science as a subfield in itself, the content and contexts of some of the PISA tasks are drawn from environmental issues.

In terms of *knowledge of science*, the framework identified four categories: "Physical systems", "Living systems", "Earth and space systems" and "Technology systems". Table 1.1 sets out the contents of the four knowledge of science categories, highlighting examples relevant to the environment. For instance, conservation is mentioned in the "Physical systems" category while sustainability occurs within "Living systems" and global climate within "Earth and space systems".

**Table 1.1**  
**PISA 2006 knowledge of science categories**

<b>Physical systems</b>
Structure of matter (e.g. particle model, bonds)
Properties of matter (e.g. changes of state, thermal and electrical conductivity)
Chemical changes of matter (e.g. reactions, energy transfer, acids/bases)
Motions and forces (e.g. velocity, friction)
Energy and its transformation (e.g. <i>conservation</i> , dissipation, chemical reactions)
Interactions of energy and matter (e.g. light and radio waves, sound and seismic waves)
<b>Living systems</b>
Cells (e.g. structures and function, <i>DNA</i> , plant and animal)
Humans (e.g. health, nutrition, subsystems [ <i>i.e.</i> digestion, respiration, circulation, excretion, and their relationship], disease, reproduction)
Populations (e.g. species, evolution, <i>biodiversity</i> , <i>genetic variation</i> )
Ecosystems (e.g. food chains, matter and energy flow)
Biosphere (e.g. ecosystem services, <i>sustainability</i> )
<b>Earth and space systems</b>
Structures of the Earth systems (e.g. <i>lithosphere</i> , <i>atmosphere</i> , <i>hydrosphere</i> )
Energy in the Earth systems (e.g. sources, <i>global climate</i> )
Change in Earth systems (e.g. plate tectonics, geochemical cycles, constructive and destructive forces)
Earth's history (e.g. fossils, origin and evolution)
Earth in space (e.g. gravity, solar systems)
<b>Technology systems</b>
Role of science-based technology (e.g. solve problems, help humans meet needs and wants, design and conduct investigations)
Relationships between science and technology (e.g. technologies contribute to scientific advancement)
Concepts (e.g. optimisation, trade-offs, cost, risk, benefit)
Important principles (e.g. criteria, constraints, innovation, invention, problem solving)

Note: Examples of environment-related topics are in italics.



In terms of contexts, Table 1.2 outlines the issues identified in the PISA 2006 science framework. These context areas were chosen because of their relevance to students' interests and lives.

**Table 1.2**  
**Contexts for the PISA 2006 science assessment**

	<b>Personal</b> (self, family and peer groups)	<b>Social</b> (the community)	<b>Global</b> (life across the world)
<b>Health</b>	maintenance of health, accidents, nutrition	control of disease, social transmission, food choices, community health	<i>epidemics</i> , spread of infectious diseases
<b>Natural resources</b>	personal <i>consumption</i> of materials and energy	maintenance of human populations, quality of life, security, production and distribution of food, energy supply	renewable and non-renewable, <i>natural systems</i> , population growth, <i>sustainable use of species</i>
<b>Environmental quality</b>	<i>environmentally friendly behaviour, use and disposal of materials</i>	<i>population distribution, disposal of waste, environmental impact, local weather</i>	<i>biodiversity, ecological sustainability, control of pollution, production and loss of soil</i>
<b>Hazard</b>	natural and human-induced, decisions about housing	rapid changes [earthquakes, severe weather], slow and progressive changes ( <i>coastal erosion, sedimentation</i> ), risk assessment	<i>climate change</i> , impact of modern warfare
<b>Frontiers of science and technology</b>	interest in science's explanations of natural phenomena, science-based hobbies, sport and leisure, music and personal technology	new materials, devices and processes, <i>genetic modification</i> , weapons technology, transport	<i>extinction of species</i> , exploration of space, origin and structure of the universe

Note: Examples of environment-related topics are in italics.

This report focuses on how students performed in answering the PISA science questions that were related to environmental science and geoscience. While as noted above, a broad definition of environmental science education includes both knowledge and attitudes towards the environment, the latter are not used in the development of the environmental science or geoscience performance indices nor in any other of the established PISA performance scales. Only PISA science test assessment questions relating to environmental science and geoscience were included in the computation of these indices.

The PISA 2006 science framework did not identify an independent conceptual basis for analysing environmental science or geoscience with PISA data. Rather, the performance measures presented in this report were established *post-hoc* through additional analyses of the PISA data. To distinguish these performance measures from the established PISA science, reading and mathematics literacy scales that were established in the assessment and formally adopted by participating countries, the report uses the term index for the environmental science and geoscience performance measures.

## ORGANISATION OF THIS REPORT

The report presents an assessment of students' performance on environmental science and geoscience as well as information on their attitudes toward the environment, using data from PISA 2006. It also reports on the sources of students' knowledge and on the factors associated with student performance.



Chapter 2 provides an overview of students' performance across the 57 countries that took part in PISA 2006 in both environmental science and geoscience. It also studies the relationships between performance and students' socio-economic and other family characteristics.

Chapter 3 analyses 15-year-olds' attitudes toward the environment and compares them across countries. It provides an overview of the relationship between students' and parents' attitudes toward environmental issues. The chapter also describes the association of attitudes and performance in environmental science.

The sources of environmental knowledge and ways this knowledge is delivered in schools are discussed in Chapter 4. The chapter also reviews the association of these variables and performance in environmental science.





# Table of contents

<b>FOREWORD</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>OVERVIEW</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>READER'S GUIDE</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1 PISA 2006 AND STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND GEOSCIENCE</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	16
<b>The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)</b> .....	17
▪ PISA, an overview .....	17
▪ Focus on students' science performance .....	19
<b>Environmental science education: A conceptual framework</b> .....	19
<b>Environmental science performance in PISA 2006</b> .....	20
<b>Organisation of this report</b> .....	21
<b>CHAPTER 2 A PROFILE OF STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND GEOSCIENCE</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Measures of performance in environmental science and geoscience</b> .....	24
<b>Main results of this chapter</b> .....	24
<b>Environmental science and geoscience performance indices in PISA 2006</b> .....	24
▪ A definition of performance in environmental science and geoscience within the PISA 2006 science framework .....	24
▪ Constructing the environmental science and geoscience performance indices and proficiency levels .....	26
▪ Constructing adjusted proficiency levels for the environmental science and geoscience performance indices .....	26
▪ Examples of tasks that students can do at each of the proficiency levels .....	28
<b>How do students perform in the environmental science and geoscience indices?</b> .....	38
▪ Student performance at the highest level of environmental science proficiency .....	38
▪ Student performance at the lowest level of environmental science proficiency .....	39
▪ Student performance in geoscience .....	39
▪ Student average performance on the environmental science and the geoscience indices .....	42
<b>Student characteristics and performance in environmental science and geoscience</b> .....	43
▪ Gender .....	43
▪ Immigrant background .....	44
▪ Socio-economic background .....	45
<b>Student performance: conclusions and implications</b> .....	45



<b>CHAPTER 3 MAKING CONNECTIONS AND TAKING RESPONSIBILITY</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Student attitudes and learning about the environment</b> .....	48
<b>Main results of this chapter</b> .....	49
<b>PISA and student attitudes towards environmental issues</b> .....	49
<b>Students' familiarity with, responsibility for, and optimism toward general environmental issues</b> .....	51
▪ Overall results .....	51
▪ Air Pollution .....	52
▪ Energy shortages .....	52
▪ Extinction of plants and animals .....	56
▪ Clearing of forests for other land use .....	56
▪ Water shortage .....	56
▪ Nuclear waste .....	57
<b>Students' awareness and self-perception of their ability to understand complex environmental challenges</b> .....	57
<b>Are students' characteristics related to their attitudes towards the environment?</b> .....	59
▪ Parents' attitudes towards the environment .....	59
▪ Gender differences in attitudes towards resources and the environment .....	60
▪ Socio-economic background and attitudes towards resources and the environment .....	60
▪ Immigrant background and attitudes towards resources and the environment .....	61
<b>Are attitudes related to the environmental science performance index?</b> .....	61
▪ Students' sense of responsibility towards environmental issues .....	61
▪ Students' optimism regarding environmental issues .....	63
▪ Students' awareness of complex environmental issues .....	63
<b>Student attitudes: conclusions and implications</b> .....	63
<b>CHAPTER 4 LEARNING ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND GEOSCIENCE</b> .....	<b>67</b>
<b>Schools and environmental science education</b> .....	68
<b>Main results of this chapter</b> .....	68
<b>Environmental science and geoscience in the school science curriculum</b> .....	69
<b>Out-of-classroom activities to promote learning of environmental science in schools</b> .....	71
<b>Sources for learning about environmental issues</b> .....	73
▪ Sources of knowledge and performance in the environmental science index .....	77
<b>Learning about the environment: conclusions and implications</b> .....	77
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<b>APPENDIX A DATA TABLES</b> .....	<b>83</b>
<b>APPENDIX B TECHNICAL NOTES</b> .....	<b>115</b>



## LIST OF BOXES

Box 3.1	The OECD Survey on Household Environmental Behaviour .....	48
Box 3.2	Actual questions towards environmental issues.....	50
Box 3.3	Interpreting PISA attitudinal data.....	52
Box 4.1	Environmental questions .....	69
Box 4.2	The school building as a teacher .....	74

## LIST OF FIGURES

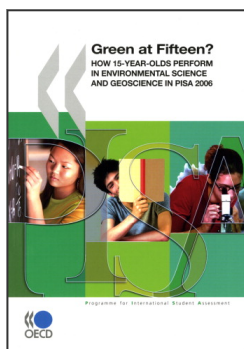
Figure 1.1	A map of PISA countries and economies.....	18
Figure A	Greenhouse.....	29
Figure B	Grand Canyon.....	34
Figure C	Acid Rain .....	36
Figure 2.1	Percentage of students at each proficiency level on the environmental science performance index.....	38
Figure 2.2	Percentage of students at each proficiency level on the geoscience performance index .....	42
Figure 2.3	Gender differences in the environmental science performance index .....	43
Figure 2.4	Differences between native students and students with an immigrant background in the environmental science performance index .....	44
Figure 2.5	Performance on the environmental science index by quarters of the PISA index of social, economic and cultural status (ESCS).....	45
Figure 3.1	Students' familiarity with environmental issues.....	53
Figure 3.2	Index of students' sense of responsibility for environmental issues .....	54
Figure 3.3	Index of students' optimism regarding environmental issues.....	55
Figure 3.4	Index of students' awareness of more complex environmental issues.....	58
Figure 3.5	Parents' sense of responsibility for environmental issues.....	59
Figure 3.6	Parents' optimism regarding environmental issues.....	60
Figure 3.7	Relationship between students' attitudes and environmental science performance after accounting for student and school background.....	62
Figure 4.1	Placement of environmental topics in the school curriculum .....	70
Figure 4.2	Outside classroom learning activities for environmental science.....	72
Figure 4.3	Main sources for students to learn about environmental issues in the OECD.....	76
Figure 4.4	Relationship between sources of students' knowledge about extinction of plants and animals and environmental science performance after accounting for background variables.....	78

## LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	PISA 2006 knowledge of science categories.....	20
Table 1.2	Contexts for the PISA 2006 science assessment .....	21
Table 2.1	The environmental science performance index within the PISA science framework.....	25
Table 2.2	Proficiency levels on the environmental science and geoscience performance indices.....	27
Table 2.3	Multiple comparisons of mean performance on the environmental science performance index.....	40



Table A2.1	Percentage of students by proficiency level in the environmental science performance index.....	84
Table A2.2	Percentage of students by proficiency level in the geoscience performance index .....	85
Table A2.3	Mean score on the environmental science performance index and on the geoscience performance index, by gender.....	86
Table A2.4	Mean score on the environmental science performance index and on the geoscience performance index, by students' immigrant background.....	87
Table A2.5	Performance on the environmental science index and on the geoscience index, adjusted by the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) and by quarters of the index of ESCS .....	88
<hr/>		
Table A3.1	Students' familiarity with environmental issues.....	90
Table A3.2	Index of students' sense of responsibility for environmental issues .....	91
Table A3.3	Index of students' optimism regarding environmental issues.....	92
Table A3.4	Index of students' awareness of more complex environmental issues.....	93
Table A3.5	Parents' sense of responsibility for environmental issues.....	94
Table A3.6	Parents' optimism regarding environmental issues.....	94
Table A3.7	Relationship between parents' and students' attitude towards environmental issues .....	94
Table A3.8	Effect sizes for gender differences (females minus males) in environmental science attitude indices.....	95
Table A3.9	Effect sizes for the difference between the top and bottom quarters of the PISA index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) for environmental science attitude indices .....	96
Table A3.10	Effect sizes for the difference between students with an immigrant background and native students for environmental science attitude indices.....	97
Table A3.11	Correlation between performance, attitudes and socio-economic background indices.....	98
Table A3.12	Relationship between student and school background factors and the environmental science performance index.....	98
Table A3.13	Relationship between student and school demographic and socio-economic background factors and the environmental science performance index, by country .....	99
Table A3.14	Relationship between students' attitudes towards environmental issues and the environmental science performance index, by country .....	101
<hr/>		
Table A4.1	Placement of environmental topics in the school curriculum .....	102
Table A4.2	Relationship between curriculum placement of environmental issues and environmental science performance, by country.....	103
Table A4.3	Outside classroom learning activities for environmental science.....	104
Table A4.4	Relationship between school activities for learning of environmental topics and environmental science performance, by country .....	105
Table A4.5	Main sources for students to learn about environmental issues.....	107
Table A4.6	Relationship between sources of students' knowledge about the extinction of plants and animals and the environmental science performance index, by country .....	113



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## **Green at Fifteen?**

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