

# Dewalska-Opitek, Anna

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## Consumers' attitudes towards ecological goods - empirical approach

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Anna DEWALSKA-OPITEK  
The General Jerzy Ziętek Silesian School of Management  
in Katowice

## **Consumers' attitudes towards ecological goods – empirical approach**

**Summary:** Consumers' attitudes towards certain lifestyles and patterns of consumption create trends which are a part of consumers' behavior in the global aspect. One of those trends is an increasing level of ecological awareness of consumers who prefer ecological goods and organic food in particular. The trend seems to have been disturbed lately. The main subject of this paper would be to identify the attitudes and their determinants of consumers living in the Silesia Voivodeship.

**Key words:** attitudes, ecological goods

### **Introduction**

There has been a growing trend to be seen for last decades – the ecological trend. It is based on the main idea, that everything which is natural may not be harmful – neither to consumers nor to the environment, in contradiction to processed goods, synthetic components, artificial fertilizers, etc., used in production processes, which are harmful to people and other ecosystem elements.

Rapid development of ecological awareness wouldn't be possible without emergence of other trends, such as: growing concern for health, importance of consumers' quality of life or increasing level of ethnocentrism. These trends determined specific patterns of behaviour and created lifestyles of purchasers preferring natural, organic goods, which contents and production process are not harmful to people and damaging to the environment. The ecological trend primarily came into being in developed countries that reached high standard of living of their citizens, than was adopted in other countries and played an active role in the worldwide globalization process of consumers' behaviour. In response to the rising demand for ecological goods the supply appeared. There are more and

more ecological producers and processors offering organic food, cosmetics and other products. Ecological entrepreneurs implement a variety of goods to the market; they also pay attention to the proper production technology consistent with the concept of socially responsible business as well as the sustained development.

Despite the growing ecological trend, there is a group of consumers rejecting organic goods. We may point at following reasons for that attitude: insufficient ecological consumers' awareness, high prices and difficult access to organic goods in the market. Sometimes unexpected circumstances may discourage people from buying ecological goods; make them distrustful, like finding e-coli bacteria in food that came from ecological growing crops in Germany in May 2011.

Closer insight into the consumers' attitude towards ecological goods seems crucial to the issue. The theoretic presentation will be followed by a practical verification of consumers' opinions and points of view on organic production in the form of direct research carried out with the use of an internet survey among polish customers. Results allowed drawing conclusions to the attitudes towards ecological goods and possible organic market development.

## **Ecological products and their purchasers – theoretical approach**

### **Ecological goods characteristics**

The deliberation on consumers' attitudes towards ecological goods should be commenced on the definition of "ecological goods". The adjective "ecological" is defined in a dictionary as "environmental, natural, healthy, concerning best mutual relations between men's activity and the environment; harmful neither to people, nor to the environment" [16]. Ecological goods are sometimes described in the literature as "organic", "natural", "bio", but one should remember, these are not always synonymous. Natural product (produced, made of at least one natural component) is not necessarily organic (made from natural components by the use of proper technology of production or growing method).

Ecological (organic) products may be defined as "goods, which disadvantageous impact on the environment has been strongly decreased or even eliminated" [2]. Goods may be characterised as ecological in case they have the following features:

- the quantity of raw materials used in the production process was strongly decreased or they were recycled,
- the process of production is not damaging to the environment,
- the raw materials used for production are non-toxic,
- products and their components are not tested on animals,
- packaging may be reused,

- the energy consumption is minimized on each stage of products production and usage,
- there is a system that enables to collect used products or their parts,
- the whole product or its parts may be reused again,
- there is no physical and moral artificially accelerated ageing of a product (e.g. via advertisement of the more recent types of a given product) [12].

Ecological goods are primarily associated with food. Ecological food is one that was produced in farms which have a lawful certificate, is processed according to the method which protects as much nutritious values as possible, is produced and stored without preservatives, coloring agents and is sent for sale in biologically processed packaging [17]. On the other hand, according to the legal regulations, ecological food is one that contains at least 95% of components produced with use of ecological methods or completely pure components (i.e. organic materials) or contains at least 70% of these components and the remaining components are of an agricultural origin and are allowed to be processed with use of ecological methods [18].

The largest share among the food products in Poland have:

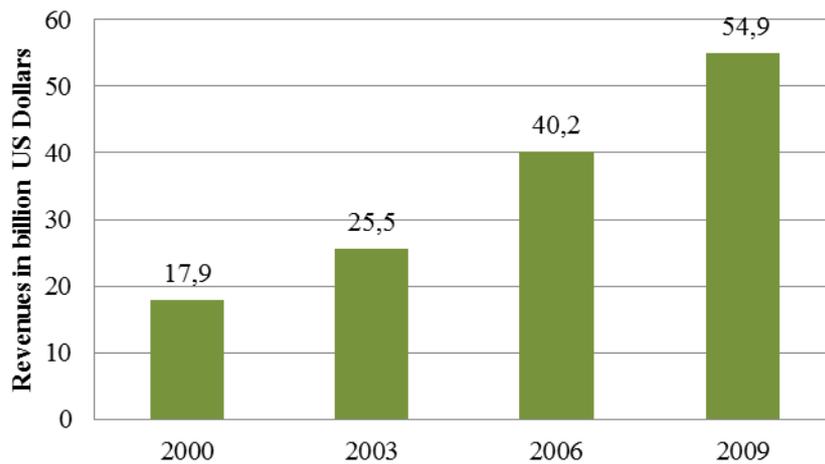
- fruits and root vegetables and their preserves (dried fruit),
- cereals and cereal products,
- meat,
- milk and dairy products,
- eggs,
- organic wine,
- honey and apiculture products,
- sprouts,
- herbaceous and seasoning plants.

The fact which should be considered is that organic products do not refer only to food. Increasingly popular are organic cosmetics, biodegradable packaging, ecological fabrics, ecological clothing production, ecological home and garden equipment. The term “organic” or “ecological” has been applied not only to the products made of non-artificial chemical substances but also these, which are produced, used and utilized without a hostile influence on environment [14].

### **Ecological products market in Poland and in the world**

There has been a growth tendency noted in the world ecological market on both demand-side (there is an increase in number of purchasers as well as an increase of ecological products' input on household expenditures) and supply-side – more and more producers, manufacturers and confectioners. The data of FiBL (The Research Institute of Organic Agriculture- Swiss research institute) shows that the largest share in world organic production has food. In 2009 the value of ecological products market amounted approximately to 54,9 billion USD (i.e. approximately 40 billion Euro), it was the trebled turnover since 1999, when the

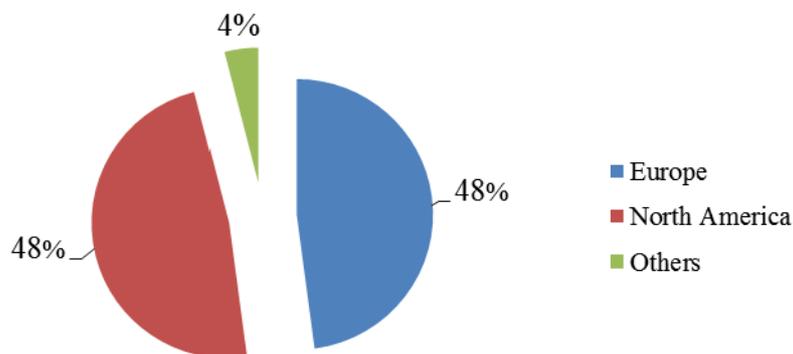
value was estimated at approximately 15 billion USD. The data is presented in Fig. 1.



**Fig. 1.** Development of the global market for organic food and beverages

Source: Organic Agriculture Worldwide: Key results from the survey on organic agriculture worldwide 2011; [www.fibl.org](http://www.fibl.org)

More than 90% of income from ecological products is generated in the northern hemisphere [16]. The income structure presents Fig. 2.

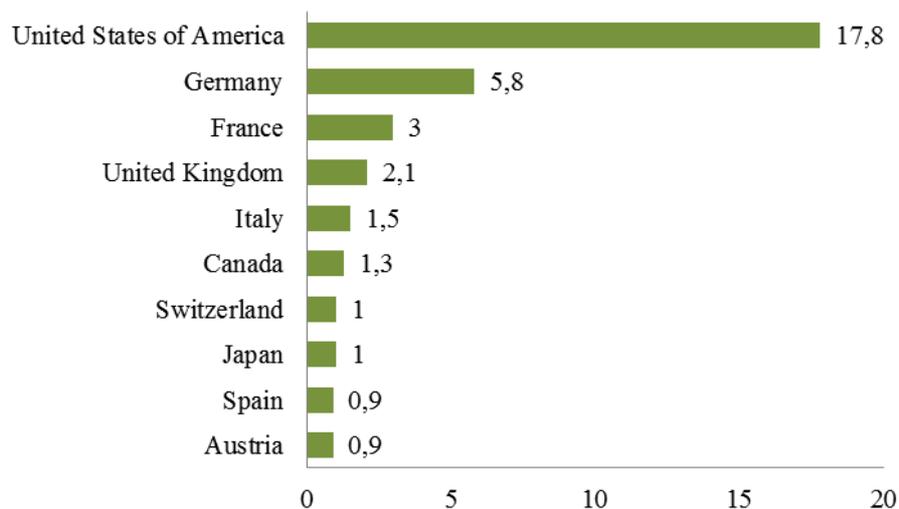


**Fig. 2.** Organic products revenues by region

Source: Organic Agriculture Worldwide: Key results from the survey on organic agriculture worldwide 2011; [www.fibl.org](http://www.fibl.org)

The United States was the largest market for ecological products in 2009, where the value of the sold goods reached approximately 18 billion Euro. France and Germany are European leaders. Sales value of organic food reached accord-

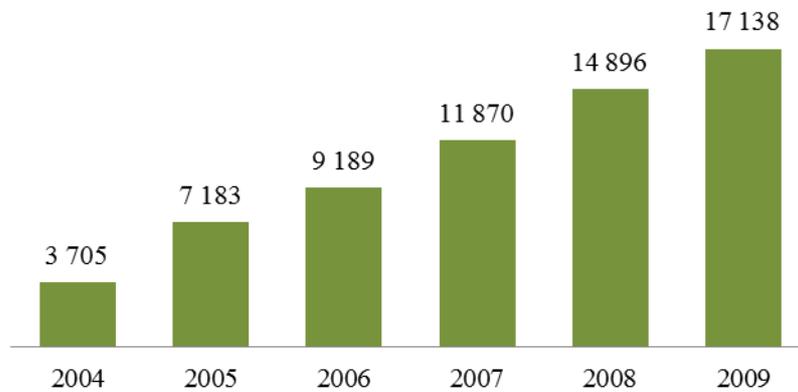
ingly 5,8 billion and 3 billion Euro [16]. The countries with the largest domestic markets for organic food in 2009 are presented in Fig. 3.



**Fig. 3.** Organic products revenues by region in bln USD

Source: Organic Agriculture Worldwide: Key results from the survey on organic agriculture worldwide 2011; [www.fibl.org](http://www.fibl.org)

Ecological food market in Poland was estimated at approximately 400 billion zł. It is still a niche market. The average share of ecological food in Western Europe countries amounted approximately 2,5% of the food market value, while in Poland is amounted to approximately 0,2%. Nevertheless it is still a fast-growing market of a great potential. It has been estimated that ecological food market will increase by 100 – 150% till 2013 which means it will reach the value of 800 million – 1 billion zł. [14]. According to information of Agricultural and Food Quality Inspection (IJHARS) presented in the document “Ecological farming in Poland – Report 2007–2008 [13]”, the year 2004 was crucial, when the number of ecological farms was almost doubled and this trend has been still continued. There was around 17 thousands ecological farms, while in 2004 – 3,7 thousands. Presented values illustrate Fig. 4.



**Fig. 4.** Development of organic food producers in Poland

Source: IJHARS, 2010

The number of ecological products suppliers – processors, importers and distributors has also grown in the past decade, although the dynamics was not so high. It should be noted that in spite of slower development the branch has resisted the economic crisis. Increasing consumers' awareness of benefits resulting from: ecological products consumption, sustained development hence environmental protection, access to media as a source of the knowledge about organic goods, their increasing availability – these are undoubtedly factors that stimulate development of ecological products market. But one of the major barriers that impede increase of eco goods is their high price – ecological products are often even twice as expensive as their non-organic counterparts [14]. According to market research survey it is just the price together with household income that constitutes basic factors of economical nature which determine the demand for ecological products (more: [17]).

### **Consumer and his attitude towards ecological products**

Consumer behavior in the market is a very complex category. They constitute the subject of scientific disputes and market researches of both economic theorists and business practitioners. Purchasers of ecological goods are more and more common research subjects. The results of research (see [15], [1], [3], [11]) allowed distinction of two groups of customers, in which prevail highly educated, relatively wealthy citizens of big cities who have children. As can be seen, to feature eco-consumer segment objective segmentation criteria were used i.e. demographic, social or economic. However, what was noticed by W. Łuczka-Bakuła, traditional consumer theory does not explain to a sufficient degree why some of the consumers, having a choice between conventional and ecological product, prefer the second ones, regardless of their higher price. To determine criterion of consumers decision optimization one should use the set of such de-

terminants as: emotions, opinions, stimuli and reactions to stimuli, thus attitudes [9].

Complex and multidimensional character of attitudes requires a range of decisions of terminological nature. Many definitions originating from different disciplines and scientific schools can be found in literature. In social science, according to S. Nowak “attitude of man towards an object is a set of relatively stable abilities to evaluate this object and to react emotionally to it [...]” [6].

Marketing approach treats consumers attitudes as “permanently positive or negative (resulting from experience) assessment, emotional feeling or inclinations connected with determined object or idea” [7].

If attitudes are evaluation, it means that are positive or negative reaction to an object, in this case – to ecological products. Attitudes can be characterized by different features, among them:

- attitude content, referring to its object, including products, brands, firms etc.,
- range of attitudes connected with a number of phenomena and situations it refers to (attitude may refer to an individual object or refer to larger number of objects so it can differ in generality degree),
- attitude direction that indicates positive or negative approach to determined person, thing and phenomena,
- attitude strength expressed in the intensity of positive or negative approach to attitude’s object,
- attitude permanency meaning that it is an element of little variability in time; in case of unsustainability of particular approach to attitude’s object we can say only about approach; attitude’s permanence is connected to some extend with its strength, which means that there is bigger probability of change of weak attitude than strong ones [5].

Attitude is a subjective category. Many different factors affect it; both objective (e.g. market, institutional and social conditions) as well as subjective (including willingness to gain information about ecological products) perception of products and motives consumers has in their purchase decisions. The described relations are presented in Fig. 5.

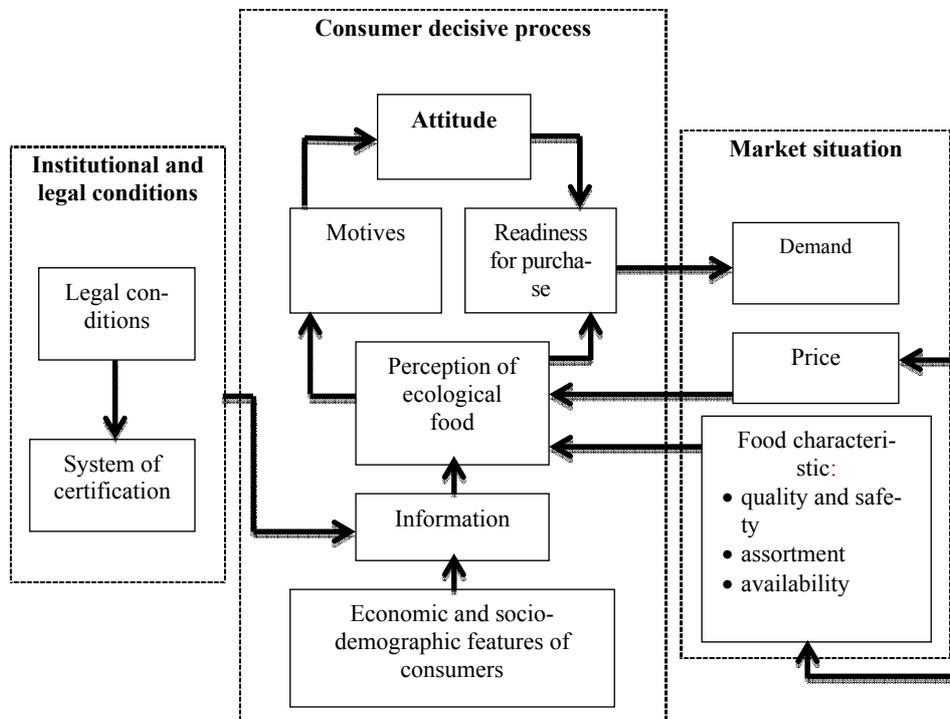


Fig. 5. Factors influencing consumers' attitudes towards ecological goods

Source: W. Łuczka-Bakuła: Rynek żywności ekologicznej. PWE, Warszawa 2007, s. 126

Currently there is much information about ecological products; however availability does not mean desired state of knowledge on organic goods among the customers. There appears phenomenon called "the knowledge gap, the conscious deficit". Another dangerous phenomenon is "greenwashing", which means giving an incomplete information (e.g. that natural components were used during production, whereas also non-organic components were used) or even untrue information about organic character of products. Such activity misleads and misinforms purchasers who aim at maximization of benefits due to purchase decisions.

Essential factor that influences customers' attitude is perception of ecological products, thus perceiving of their features, characteristics and values. Of course, perception is characterized by high individualization; however some characteristics of organic goods seem to gain particular significance for purchasers. Examples of a significance of features attributed to ecological food by consumers is presented on the Hierarchical Value Map (HVM) shown on Fig. 6.

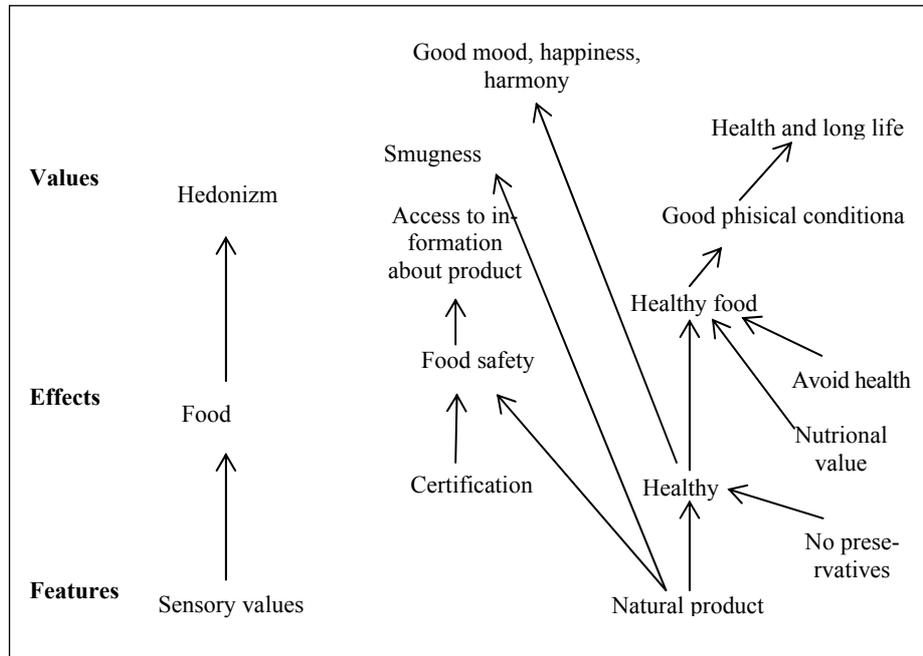


Fig. 6. Hierarchical Value Map for organic food created by irregular buyers

Source: W. Łuczka-Bakuła: *Rynek żywności ekologicznej*, op. cit., s. 136

The results of many studies prove the thesis of M. Grossman, that consumers of ecological products', with an emphasis on food, are led by different motives than conventional food consumers. They declare demand for well-being thus consumers' own health as well as of the members of their family (more: [9]). Therefore, ecological products are to fulfill a prevention function but also a function of evening out any health problems which have already occurred. An important element which initiates consumers' behavior is the fact of having children. The need for taking care for oneself and one's family appears. Essential influence on positive consumers' attitude towards ecological goods has products safety, especially safety of food. Consumers treat these products as more safe for health than conventional ones. It should be also noted that even though it is a common perception it is still subjective and not directly based on objective conditions. Of course there will be no pesticide residues, antibiotics, hormones, nor any other chemical protective substances. On the other hand, organic products are vulnerable to microbiological contamination, which may be the reason of serious illnesses or even epidemics – what took place in May and June 2011 in Germany when serious epidemic was caused by E-coli.

Environmental care and protection are important elements in product selection for many purchasers. Among the other motivating elements can be noted: a

certain lifestyle, e.g. vegetarianism, trends and fashion or positive opinion of friends and family members.

What is worth noticing is that the basics of ecological products market constitute consumers who purchase eco goods regularly. Although an important role on the market play occasional and periodic purchasers (whose purchases are done once or several times per month or less often), what may be noticed on the basis of analysis of long-term changes in ecological product market is that the regular consumer participation still grows [19].

## **Consumers attitude towards ecological products – results of empirical research**

### **Self-study methods**

Research on consumers' attitude towards ecological products had direct character. It aimed at acquiring information about:

- consumers knowledge about ecological products,
- consumers feelings, emotional judgments and rating that evaluates ecological products,
- ecological products buying tendencies,

thus identification of cognitive, affective and behavioral components of attitude towards organic goods.

There were two research techniques used in the research: questionnaire and individual deepened marketing interviews completed with projecting techniques. Questionnaire technique belongs to indirect survey research. It allows acquisition of information of quantitative character. Questionnaire constitutes a collection of standardized research techniques, with help of which researcher obtains information in mutual communicating with other persons who respond in written on questions enclosed in the questionnaire [8]. The research was carried out using the internet questionnaire.

To deepen and complete information of quantitative character, the individual deepened marketing interviews were carried out. This research technique is described in the literature as a conversation, which aims at collecting of the data that directly refers to questioned person, his/her opinion and attitude [4]. The motives which occur spontaneously are undertaken and developed, doubts explained, answers deepened. The deepened interview was partly of structuralized character and was carried out on the basis of the interview script.

There were projecting techniques used within a scope of deepened interviews, which allows reflection of states, opinions of an answerer without suggesting response and the respondent may react spontaneously and answer hon-

estly. There were open-ended and association tests as well as maps of perception used from the vast range of projecting techniques.

The subjects of the research were the consumers who know the idea of ecological products. 241 respondents –internet users (because of the way of access to respondents) responded to the survey, 9 of whom declared they did not know the term “ecological products”. So they were not the subject of the survey. Numerical amount of the survey sample was finally 232 persons. These were mainly women aged 25–34, living in the city, professionally active, considering their welfare status as good. The detailed characteristics of the sample group is presented in Table No. 1.

**Table 1.** Detailed characteristic of the sample group participating in quantitative research

Specification and characteristics	Sample group (%)
1. Gender:	
a. female	79
b. male	21
2. Age:	
a. up to 24 years old	7
b. 25–34 years old	38
c. 35–44 years old	26
d. 45–54 years old	22
e. 55–64 years old	6
f. 65 years old and more	1
3. Place of living	
a. city/town	89
b. country	11
4. Professional activity	
a. working	77
b. not working:	23 including:
b. 1. a student	9
b. 2. a pensioner	5
b. 3. a housewife	7
b. 4. unemployed	2
5. Subjective evaluation of financial situation of the household:	
a. very good	5%
b. good	59%
c. ordinary	36
d. difficult	0
e. very difficult	0

Based on own source

What should be noted is that in spite of large numerical amount of the sample it is not of representative character. Acquired information does not allow concluding on the basis of general population.

There was group of 10 respondents who took part in the research. The deepened interviews that were carried out on a small and not representative survey sample group do not allow generalization but made it possible to look deeper into reaction an attitude of respondents according to ecological products, however without statistical confirmation. The detailed characteristics present Table No. 2.

**Table 2.** Detailed characteristic of the sample group participating in qualitative research

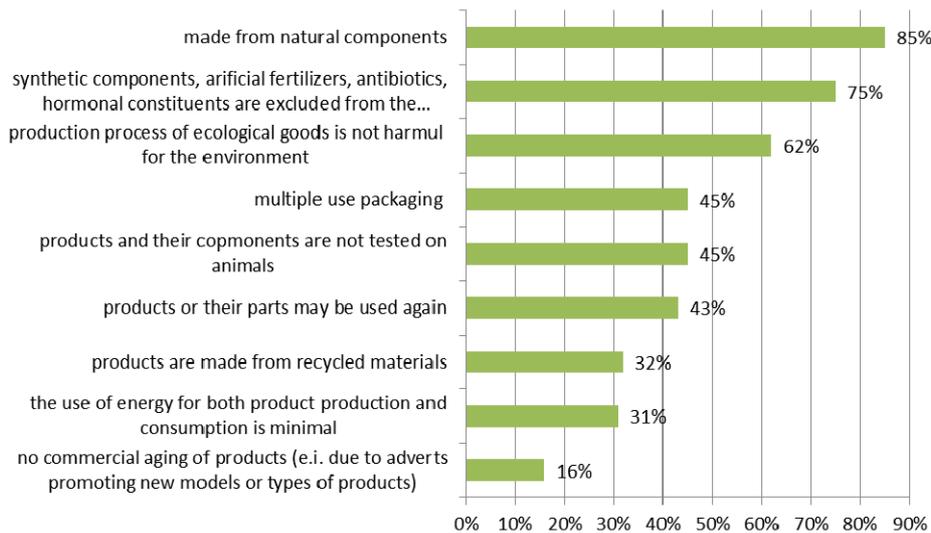
Specification and characteristics	Sample group (%)
1. Gender:	
a. female	70
b. male	30
2. Age:	
a. up to 24 years old	20
b. 25–34 years old	50
c. 35–44 years old	10
d. 45–54 years old	10
e. 55–64 years old	10
f. 65 years old and more	0
3. Place of living	
a. city/town	90
b. country	10
4. Professional activity	
a. working	70
b. not working:	30 including:
20	20
0	0
10	10
0	0
5. Subjective evaluation of financial situation of the household:	
a. very good	20
b. good	70
c. ordinary	10
d. difficult	0
e. very difficult	0

Based on own resource

The objects of the research were consumers' attitudes towards ecological products, with the strongest consideration given to food. The research was conducted in July and August 2011. Because of the way of access to respondents – the internet questionnaire was placed in several nationwide internet sites and portals which refer to health and ecological products; as a territory range the country territory was assumed.

### Direct research results

Respondents were asked to explain what the characteristics of ecological products are. For the great majority of respondents such products are made of natural, organic components (indicated 85%), production technology eliminates usage of chemical and synthetic components, artificial fertilizers, pesticides, antibiotics etc., hence production process is not harmful for environment – such answers were given by respectively 75% and 62% of respondents. Approximately the half of respondents (47%) claims that ecological products cannot be tested on animals. A detailed characteristic of ecological goods according to respondents' opinion presents Fig. 7. On account of conjunctive cafeteria percentage values do not sum up to 100%.

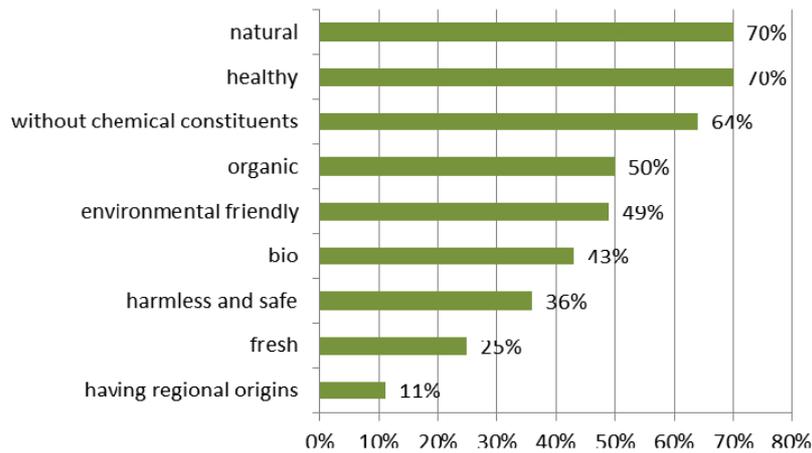


**Fig. 7.** Characteristic features of ecological goods in respondents' opinion

Based on own source

Respondents were asked about terms they associated with ecological product. Terms “natural” and “healthy” were indicated most often by respondents (app. 70% for each), “without chemical constituents” – by 64%, 50 % of re-

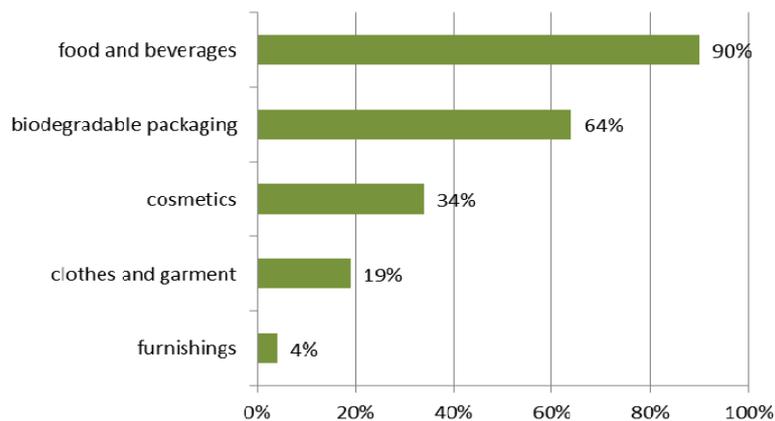
spondents answered “earth friendly” and “organic”. Fig. 8 illustrates respondents’ associations with ecological product.



**Fig. 8.** Respondents’ associations with ecological products

Based on own source

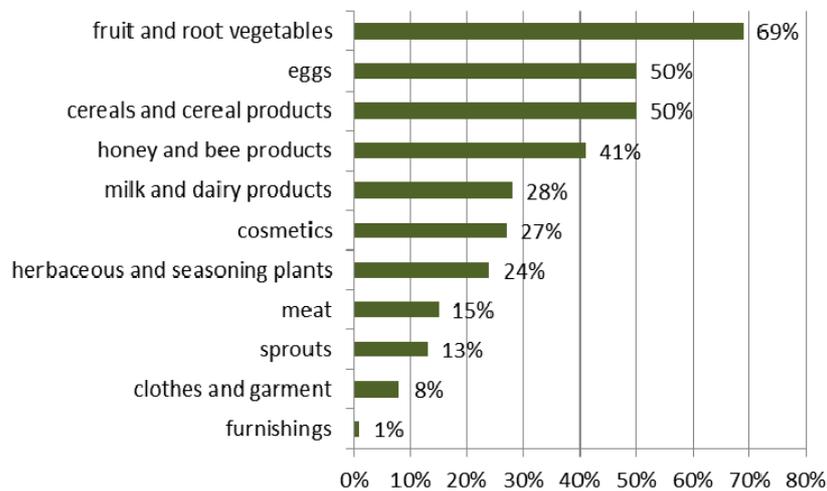
For the great majority of respondents, ecological product is food (90%). For app. 60% the term ecological product refers also to biodegradable packaging. For every third female respondent, ecological products are cosmetics; for every fifth textile and clothes. Furnishings were the least associated with ‘ecological’ (4%). Fig. 9 illustrates presented data.



**Fig. 9.** Components of ecological products in respondents’ opinion

Based on own source

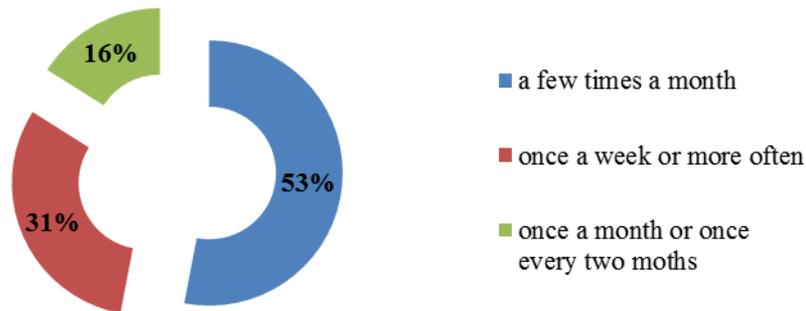
Behavioral component of the respondents' attitude was identified in the carried out research, what means that a tendency to ecological products purchase was examined. What resulted from the gained information is that the great majority of respondents (87%) buy ecological products. The most common are fruits, vegetables and their preserves (69%), in the second place are cereal products and preserves as well as eggs (50% indications). Moreover, respondents reach for honey and other apicultural products (41%), milk and dairy products (28%), herbs and tea (24%) and sprouts (13%). Approximately 30% of respondents reach for organic cosmetics, 8% for clothes, but 1% for household equipment. Fig. 10 illustrates presented data.



**Fig. 10.** Ecological products usually bought by respondents'

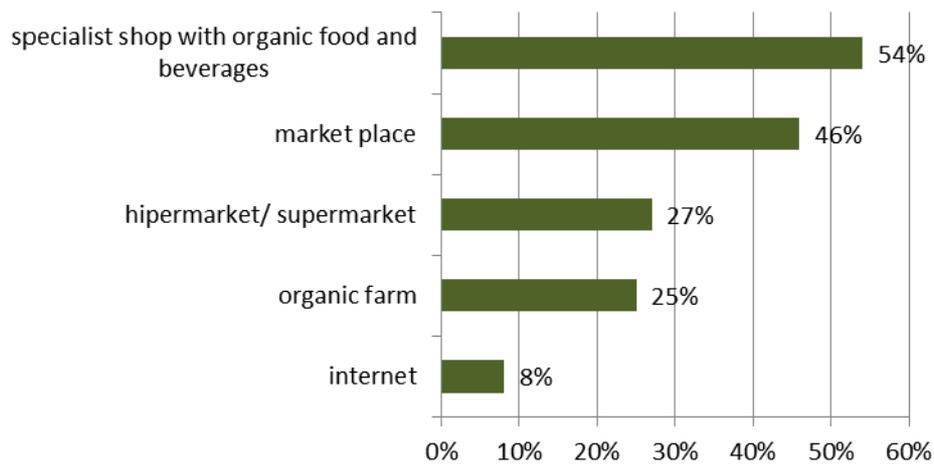
Based on own source

Because of the fact that food is the best associated and the most often indicated ecological good in purchase declarations, respondents were asked how often and where they buy it. A bit more than half of respondents (53%) reach for ecological products a few times per month, every third of them once per week or more often (Fig. 11). The most preferable places for ecological food purchase are specialist stores which offer organic food (54% indications), marketplace (46%) and supermarkets (27%), which more and more often introduce ecological products lines (e.g. Tesco or Carrefour). What is interesting, only 8% of respondents pointed internet as the place of organic food purchase. The mostly chosen places for ecological food purchase are illustrated in Fig. 12.



**Fig. 11.** Frequency of purchase of organic food

Based on own source



**Fig. 12.** Places of purchase of organic food

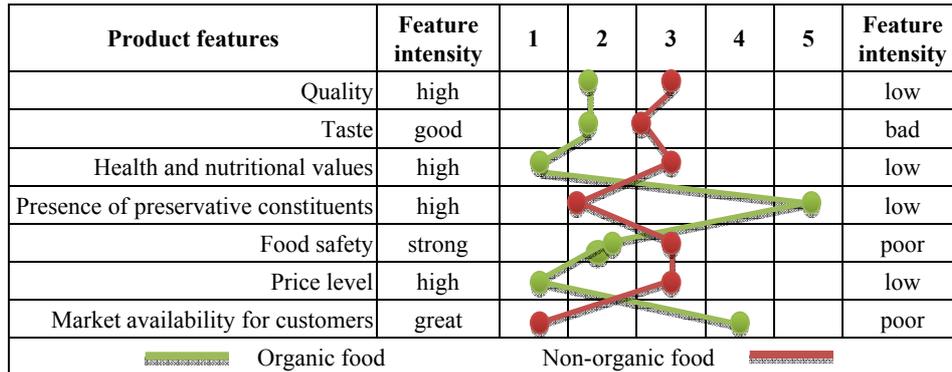
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Interesting from empirical point of view is also affective component of examined attitudes that are feelings, emotional opinions and estimations which evaluate products in respondents' opinion.

Respondents asked about their attitude towards organic goods, declared positive attitude recognized them as: "good", "recommendable", "good for children". Health aspect of ecological goods was often emphasized- especially in case of food. Such terms as "healthy", "good for health" occurred, although the aesthetic value of the organic food was not always appreciated: "healthy, although it does not seem to look as attractive as traditional one".

Consumers who took part in the survey were asked to evaluate both ecological and non-ecological (traditional) food in terms of a few criteria among them:

quality, taste, health value and nutritional values, presence of preservative constituents, safety, and market availability. The obtained results present semantic profile in chart No. 13.



**Fig. 13.** Semantic profile of both organic and non-organic goods

Based on own source

What results from information acquired during the survey, respondents perceive ecological and traditional food differently. The biggest differences refer to preservatives presence in products –they assumed it was “very high” in case of traditional food and “very low” in case of organic one. The next elements of a different evaluation were: market products availability and price. Taking into consideration these two criteria, ecological food has gained worse notes and has been evaluated as more expensive and less available on the market in comparison to traditional food.

In terms of taste and quality, organic and non-organic food has been evaluated comparably. It seems to be very interesting because of the fact that these criteria in the subject literature are treated as factors which determine difference between ecological and traditional food.

Respondents asked to evaluate food in terms of health safety evaluated them quite similarly. It should be noted, that extreme opinions have occurred in both cases: “very safe” and “very unsafe” were opinions referring both to organic and non-organic food. Respondents were also asked if information about contamination of food with E-coli in May and June of 2011 influenced their opinions about ecological food. Obtained results allow stating that in case of the great majority of respondents (81%) this information had no influence on their attitude towards organic goods. However, 16% of them admitted that “it limited their trust for ecological food”, “made them buy only proven product of selected producers”, “they reach for selected food”.

## Conclusions

On the basis of both theoretical deliberation and research results it may be stated, that the market for ecological products has been growing continuously. The main engine of the growth in the sector is actually the consumer, or, more accurately speaking, the consumers' awareness of health and principles of sustained development and, as a consequence, the need to protect the natural environment. Consumers become more and more aware of the dangers and benefits arising from using products like: cosmetics, clothes and other goods of everyday use, and eating more or less processed food. Bioproducts offer an alternative to cheaper non organic ones, but with preservatives that may cause possible harm to consumers' health. Especially high prices of organic goods and their poorer accessibility except for larger towns and cities may be identified as barriers in ecomarket development. Nevertheless, the advantageous and favourable consumers' attitudes towards organic products will make the sector grow in future.

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### **Postawy konsumentów wobec produktów ekologicznych w świetle badań empirycznych**

**Synopsis:** Postawy konsumentów wobec określonych stylów życia i wzorów konsumpcji tworzą trendy, wpisując się w ogólny nurt globalizacji zachowań konsumentów. Do takich powszechnych trendów można zaliczyć m. in. rosnący poziom świadomości ekologicznej konsumentów i zwiększoną troskę o zdrowie. Widoczne stają się globalne preferencje konsumentów wobec produktów ekologicznych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem żywności, choć wydaje się, że ich natężenie uległo zmianie. Postawy konsumentów województwa śląskiego wobec produktów ekologicznych (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem żywności organicznej) oraz ich determinanty stanowiąc będą przedmiot badań empirycznych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** postawy, produkty ekologiczne