



Report: Humans could use two Earths

Global 'footprint' left by consumption is growing, conservationists argue

MSNBC staff and news service reports

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BEIJING - Humans are stripping nature at an unprecedented rate and will need two planets' worth of natural resources every year by 2050 if current trends continue, according to a report published Tuesday by the World Wildlife Fund and the Global Footprint Network.

"For more than 20 years we have exceeded the Earth's ability to support a consumptive lifestyle that is unsustainable and we cannot afford to continue down this path," WWF Director-General James Leape said in releasing the 2006 Living Planet Report in Beijing.

"If everyone around the world lived as those in America, we would need five planets to support us," Leape added.

Largely because of its huge per capita emissions of carbon dioxide — a gas many scientists tie to global warming — the United Arab Emirates were placing the most stress per capita on the planet ahead of the United States, Finland, Canada, Kuwait and Australia, the report said.

Using the report's criteria, Cuba is the only country in the world that has a high level of development, including good health and education systems, and does not use up more resources than is sustainable.

Groups: Footprint getting bigger

The report estimated that "humanity's footprint has more than tripled between 1961 and 2003" — and that consumption has even outpaced global population growth from 3 billion in 1960 to the 6.5 billion today.

In 2003, the report added, humanity's ecological footprint — the demand people place on the natural world — was 25 percent greater than the planet's annual ability to provide everything from food to energy and recycle all human waste.

"This ecological 'overshoot' means that it now takes about one year and three months for the Earth to regenerate what we use in a single year," the conservation groups said in a statement. "Overshoot has increased by 4 percent since the last Living Planet Report, which was based on 2001 data, and is projected to rise to 30 percent in 2006."

"On current projections, humanity will be using two planets' worth of natural resources by 2050 — if those resources have not run out by then," the latest report said. "People are turning resources into waste faster than nature can turn waste back into resources."

"Humanity is living off its ecological credit card," Mathis Wackernagel, head of the Global Footprint Network, said in a statement. "While this can be done for a short while, overshoot ultimately leads to liquidation of the planet's ecological assets, and the depletion of resources, such as the forests, oceans and agricultural land upon which our economy depends."

The report noted that an index tracking 1,300 vertebrate species — birds, fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals — showed that populations had fallen for most by about 30 percent because of factors including a loss of habitats to farms.

Eyes on China, other growing nations

The conservation groups added that the footprint from use of fossil fuels, whose heat-trapping emissions are widely blamed for pushing up world temperatures, was the fastest-growing cause of strain.

Leape said China, home to a fifth of the world's population and whose economy is booming, was making the

right move in pledging to reduce its energy consumption by 20 percent over the next five years.

"Much will depend on the decisions made by China, India and other rapidly developing countries," he added.

"The cities, power plants and homes we build today will either lock society into damaging overconsumption beyond our lifetimes," he added, "or begin to propel this and future generations toward sustainable living."

National "footprints" charted by the Global Footprint Network are online at www.footprintnetwork.org.

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