



for a living planet

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Press Release

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EU economies living beyond ecological means: WWF

Brussels, Belgium – The growing economic strength of the European Union has doubled the ecological pressure on the planet in the past 30 years, according to a new report from WWF, the global conservation organisation. Despite technological advances, environmental pressure has been growing at a faster rate than the European population, creating a deficit of natural resources for the rest of the world and for future generations.

“Just a generation ago much of Europe was an ecological creditor, using fewer resources than it had,” said Tony Long, Director of WWF’s European Policy Office. “But today Europe lives beyond its means. If the world’s citizens lived as Europeans, we would need 2.6 planets to provide the necessary resources and absorb the waste.”

In the new report, *“Europe 2007 – Gross Domestic Product and Ecological Footprint”*, WWF has compared EU countries’ performance in three key areas since 1971: economic growth measured by Gross Domestic Product (GDP), pressure on natural resources measured by Ecological Footprint, and human development measured by the UN’s Human Development Index.

“What we currently measure as development is a long way away from the EU and world’s stated aim of sustainable development. This is because economic decisions routinely ignore natural capital expenditure,” says WWF’s President Chief Emeka Anyaoku. “Economic indicators are essential, but without natural resource accounting, ecological deficits will go unnoticed and ignored. It is as if we spent our money without realizing that we are liquidating the planet’s capital.”

All but three EU Members – Finland, Latvia and Sweden – run an ecological deficit. Though these three countries have greater ecological reserves than others, they do not necessarily manage their assets well. Finland’s pressure on environment, for example, has grown by 70 per cent since 1975 and is now the highest among EU countries.

Germany, together with Bulgaria and Latvia, managed to reduce their ecological footprint in the past three decades while growing in human development. Nevertheless, its footprint is two-and-a-half times its natural resources and remains more than double the world average per person.

On the other hand, Greece and Spain are still expanding in both economic and consumption terms. Greece has experienced the highest growth of ecological footprint, accompanied by a limited growth in terms of human development.

France parallels the general EU trend. With improved technology, its resource availability is increasing but is outpaced by growth of consumption, with the largest component being energy.

Among Eastern European countries, Hungary’s footprint – as other former centrally planned European economies – has fallen since 1991, mainly because of economic shifts resulting from the ending of the Soviet era. Back in 1995, Slovenian citizens were practising, in global terms, sustainable development, but in 2003 Slovenia’s ecological footprint per capita had more than doubled while the development level rose by less than 5 per cent. Romania has the lowest ecological footprint in the EU-27, yet it remains an ecological debtor.

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WWF – World Wide Fund For Nature (also known as World Wildlife Fund)



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“Countries are increasingly realizing the significance of ecological assets for economic competitiveness, national security and social justice,” says Tony Long, Director of WWF’s European Policy Office. “Development has to be redefined. Improving the quality of life for hundreds of millions of people will have to be separated from ever growing material consumption and waste.”

The report was produced as a contribution to the conference “Beyond GDP”, organised by the European Parliament, European Commission, OECD, WWF and the Club of Rome in Brussels from 19 to 20 November 2007. WWF has co-sponsored the conference in Brussels with the expectation that it will lead to an action plan to reform Europe’s accounting procedures so that natural resources are considered when accounting for economic growth and progress.

For further information:

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Notes to the editors:

- The Ecological Footprint measures humanity’s demand on the biosphere in terms of the area of biologically productive land and sea required to provide the resources we use and to absorb our waste. The footprint of a country includes the cropland, grazing land, forest and fishing grounds required to produce the food, fibre and timber it consumes and absorb the waste it emits. Biocapacity is the total supply of productive area. The difference between Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity shows whether countries are ecological creditors or debtors.
- The EU is home to 7.7 per cent of the global population and 9.5 per cent of the world’s biocapacity. The EU is also responsible for 16 per cent of global ecological footprint. Europe’s shares have diminished since 1971, largely as a result of increase in global population.
- The report “Europe 2007 – Gross Domestic Product and Ecological Footprint” is available under embargo on http://assets.panda.org/downloads/europe_2007_gdp_and_ef.pdf. Graphs can be downloaded from http://assets.panda.org/downloads/europe_2007_figures.pdf and http://assets.panda.org/downloads/europe_2007_table.pdf.
- Full data on EU and world countries’ ecological footprint are available on the WWF’s Living Planet Report 2006: http://www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/living_planet_report/index.cfm.
- Photos to illustrate WWF Press Release: “Europe 2007 - Gross Domestic Product & Ecological Footprint” are available on <https://intranet.panda.org/photos/albums/ext/index.cfm?action=list&alid=825>. The image(s) made available through the above link are copyright protected and can only be used to illustrate the above mentioned press release. Any other subsequent rights are not allowed and are subject to approval by WWF International and by the photographer(s) concerned. This restriction includes that the link must not be made available to any third party, in particular it may under no circumstances be published on a public web site. Individual photo credits are mandatory. Credit information is available from the IPTC file info of the downloaded images or you can download a separate text file with the relevant information.
- B-rolls with TV images are available upon request.
- This press release and related material will be available after the embargo time on www.panda.org/eu.