



## **Living Planet analysis shows looming ecological credit crunch**

The world is heading for an ecological credit crunch as human demands on the world's natural capital reach nearly a third more than earth can sustain.

That is the stark warning contained in the latest edition of WWF's Living Planet Report, the leading statement of the planet's health. In addition global natural wealth and diversity continues to decline, and more and more countries are slipping into a state of permanent or seasonal water stress.

"The world is currently struggling with the consequences of over-valuing its financial assets," said WWF International Director-General James Leape,

"but a more fundamental crisis looms ahead -- an ecological credit crunch caused by under-valuing the environmental assets that are the basis of all life and prosperity."

The report, produced with the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) and the Global Footprint Network (GFN), shows more than three quarters of the world's people now living in nations that are ecological debtors, where national consumption has outstripped their country's biological capacity.

"Most of us are propping up our current lifestyles, and our economic growth, by drawing - and increasingly overdrawing - on the ecological capital of other parts of the world," Mr Leape said.

"If our demands on the planet continue to increase at the same rate, by the mid-2030s we would need the equivalent of two planets to maintain our lifestyles."

The report, published every two years, has since 1998 become widely accepted as an statement of earth's ability to remain a "living planet". In 2008, it adds for the first time new measures of global, national and individual water footprint to existing measures of the Ecological Footprint of human demand on natural resources and the Living Planet Index, a measure of the state of nature.

The Living Planet Index, compiled by ZSL, shows a nearly 30 per cent decline since 1970 in nearly 5000 measured populations of 1,686 species. These dramatic losses in our natural wealth are being driven by deforestation and land conversion in the tropics (50% decline in Tropical LPI) and the impact of dams, diversions and climate change on freshwater species (35% decline). Pollution, over-fishing and destructive fishing in marine and coastal environments is also taking a considerable toll.

"We are acting ecologically in the same way as financial institutions have been behaving economically - seeking immediate gratification without due regard for the consequences," said ZSL co-editor Jonathan Loh. "The consequences of a global ecological crisis are even graver than the current economic meltdown."

Carbon emissions from fossil fuel use and land disturbance are the greatest component of humanity's footprint, underlining the key threat of climate change. . The ecological footprint analysis, produced by GFN, shows that while global biocapacity – the area available to produce our resources and capture our emissions – is 2.1 average or "global" hectares per person, the per person footprint is 2.7 global ha.



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“Continued ecological deficit spending will have severe economic consequences,” said GFN Executive Director Dr Mathis Wackernagel. “Resource limitations and ecosystem collapses would trigger massive stagflation with the value of investments plummeting, while food and energy costs skyrocket.”

The USA and China have the largest national footprints, each in total about 21 per cent of global biocapacity, but US citizens each require an average of 9.4 global ha (or nearly 4.5 Planet Earths if the global population had US consumption patterns) while Chinese citizens use on average 2.1 global ha per person (one Planet Earth).

Biocapacity is unevenly distributed, with eight nations – the United States, Brazil, Russia, China, India, Canada, Argentina and Australia - containing more than half the world total. Population and consumption patterns make three of these countries ecological debtors, with footprints greater than their national biocapacity - the United States (footprint 1.8 times national biocapacity), China (2.3 times) and India ( 2.2 times).

This can be contrasted with the Congo with the seventh highest per person biocapacity of 13.9 global ha per person and an average footprint of just 0.5 global ha per person – but facing a future of degrading biocapacity from deforestation and increased demands from a rising population and export pressures.

The new water footprint measures show up the significance of water traded in the form of commodities with, for example, a cotton T-shirt requiring 2,900 litres of water in its production. On average, each person consumes 1.24 million litres (about half an Olympic swimming pool) of water a year, but this varies from 2.48 million litres per person a year (USA) to 619,000 litres per capita annually (Yemen).

“Around 50 countries are currently facing moderate or severe water stress and the number of people suffering from year-round or seasonal water shortages is expected to increase as a result of climate change,” the report finds.

“These Living Planet measures serve as clear and robust signposts to what needs to be done,” said Mr Leape. “It is our hope that in years to come we will be reporting increases in the Living Planet Index, an ecological footprint coming down in shoe sizes and water becoming more rather than less available in more places.”

The report suggests some key “sustainability wedges” which if combined could stabilise and reverse the worsening slide into ecological debt and enduring damage to global support systems.

For the single most important challenge – climate change – the report shows that a range of efficiency, renewable and low emissions “wedges” could meet projected energy demands to 2050 with reductions in carbon emissions of 60 to 80 per cent.

“If humanity has the will, it has the ways to live within the means of the planet, but we must recognize that the ecological credit crunch will require even bolder action than that now being mustered for the financial crisis” Mr Leape said.



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**Notes for editors:**

The 2008 Living Planet Report can be downloaded from [www.panda.org/lpr/08](http://www.panda.org/lpr/08)

The report and additional multimedia materials including broadcast quality video can be found at [wwf.extranet.largeblue.net](http://wwf.extranet.largeblue.net), using the password mA1aGb73

The global ecological footprint is worsening at an increasing rate. The 2006 WWF Living Planet Report revealed an excess ecological footprint of 25 per cent in 2003 (2008 LPR - 30 per cent on global data for 2005), with a projection that the two planet requirement would be reached around 2050 (2008 LPR – 2030s).

### **For further information:**

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### **About WWF**

WWF is one of the world's largest and most respected independent conservation organizations, with almost 5 million supporters and a global network active in over 100 countries. WWF's mission is to stop the degradation of the earth's natural environment and to build a future in which humans live in harmony with nature, by conserving the world's biological diversity, ensuring that the use of renewable natural resources is sustainable, and promoting the reduction of pollution and wasteful consumption.

### **About ZSL**

Founded in 1826, the Zoological Society of London (ZSL) is an international scientific, conservation and educational charity: our key role is the conservation of animals and their habitats. ZSL runs ZSL London Zoo and ZSL Whipsnade Zoo, carries out scientific research in the Institute of Zoology and is actively involved in field conservation in over forty countries worldwide. [www.zsl.org](http://www.zsl.org)

### **About GFN**

The Global Footprint Network promotes a sustainable economy by advancing the Ecological Footprint, a tool that makes sustainability measurable. Together with its partners, the network coordinates research, develops methodological standards, and provides decision makers with robust resource accounts to help the human economy operate within the Earth's ecological limits. [www.footprintnetwork.org](http://www.footprintnetwork.org)

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