

Global trade contributes to natural resource overdraft, pollution: reports

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Two new reports by environmental groups highlight the burden human consumption is putting on global natural resources and the pollution legacy left behind. Both reports stress that industrialised countries with high consumption levels directly draw on resources and pollute the environment in developing countries through their imports.

Environmental organisations the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the Zoological Society of London and the Global Footprint Network released their Living Planet Report on 29 October. According to the report – which contains both an index of the state of the planet’s ecosystems and the ecological footprint quantifying the extent of human demand on these ecosystems – three quarters of the world’s population is using more resources than is sustainable, putting them into “ecological debt.” They are over-drafting both local and, through their imports, global, forest, agricultural, water and clean air resources. In fact, by 2030 we would need two planets, not just one, to support current consumption, says the report.

Chief Emeka Anyaoku of WWF commented that “The events in the last few months have served to show us how it’s foolish in the extreme to live beyond our means. Devastating though the financial credit crunch has been, it’s nothing as compared to the ecological recession that we are facing.” Reckless consumption of natural resources today is severely threatening our future prosperity, he said.

According to the report, the US and China have the largest footprints on a global scale, while per capita footprints are highest in the US, Australia, UAE, Kuwait and Denmark. The role played by imports is illustrated by the fact that, for example, 62 percent of the water footprint in the UK stems from use abroad to produce goods for UK consumers, including beef, sugar, and cotton shirts.

Meanwhile, New York-based Blacksmith Institute and Green Cross International released their annual list of the world’s 10 worst pollution problems on 22 October. The list, compiled using figures from data base of 600 top polluted sites, contains problems of contamination by, among other, mining residues, radioactivity and industrial waste. The report says that the pollution has severe health implications for all populations, but children and women of childbearing age in particular.

Richard Fuller, founder of the Blacksmith Institute, commented that rich countries are partially responsible for these human health disasters since they import raw materials and goods while leaving behind the pollution. Among the world’s top ten sources of pollution were lead acid batteries, for which developing countries serve as recipients of an international recycling trade.

While developed countries have for the most part cleaned up their act, Fuller said, “We have exported our industry overseas and yet there’s no pollution controls in these places or the pollution controls are terribly inadequate.”

However, other major contamination problems in developing countries, such as indoor air pollution, are not related to exported goods, and many goods also feed domestic markets, especially in rapidly growing developing countries, noted the report. Fuller said that “Our goal with the 2008 report is to increase awareness of the severe toll that pollution takes on human health and inspire the international community to act. Remediation is both possible and cost-effective.”

Additional resources

The “Living Planet Report” is available online at http://www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/living_planet_report/index.cfm

The “World’s Worst Polluted Places” list is available online at <http://www.worstpolluted.org>

ICTSD reporting; “Rich World Behind Much Of Global Pollution – Groups,” REUTERS, 22 October 2008; “The World’s Top 10 Worst Pollution Problems,” SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, 22 October 2008; “Earth on course for eco ‘crunch’,” BBC, 29 October 2008.

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