

Earth Institute News

posted: 2010-01-27

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Global Environment Index Downgrades U.S. and China Richer Countries Tend to Do Better—But Not Always



On the road, Port-au-Prince, Haiti
Credit: Liana Razafindrazay/CIESIN

The United States, China and other major industrial economies have dropped in an international scoreboard that ranks nations on their management of pollution and natural resources, while Iceland pushed Switzerland from the number one spot. The study, the 2010 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), was produced by environmental experts at Yale University and Columbia University's

Earth Institute, and released at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland today.

The EPI, which comes out every other year, ranks 163 countries on their performance across 25 measures in 10 categories including environmental health, air quality, water resource management, biodiversity and habitat, forestry, fisheries, agriculture, and climate change. Along with Iceland, other top performers include Switzerland, Costa Rica, Sweden and Norway. All have made substantial investments in environmental infrastructure and pollution control, and have policies designed to move toward long-term sustainability, according to the report. Occupying the bottom five positions: Togo, Angola, Mauritania, the Central African Republic and Sierra Leone –impoverished countries that lack basic environmental amenities and policy capacity.

This is the third edition of the EPI. The [previous survey, in 2008](#), put the United States in 39th place, and China at 105th; this year the United States came in at 61st and China 121st. The United States got strong marks on some issues, such as provision of safe drinking water and forest sustainability, but fell down on greenhouse gas emissions and several aspects of local air pollution. It lags significantly behind other industrialized nations such as the United Kingdom (14th), Germany (17th), and Japan (20th). More than 20 members of the European Union outrank the United States. Iceland derived its high scores on environmental public health, controlling greenhouse gas emissions and reforestation. Because the as the report builds on data from before 2009, the authors point out that calculations do not reflect the recent policy activities of the Obama administration.

Alex deSherbinin, a geographer at the Earth Institute's [Center for International Earth Science Information Network](#) and coauthor of the report, cautioned against putting too much stock into the exact rankings, and the rises and falls of some nations. He noted that some criteria have changed in between reports, and some of the measures are fairly rough to begin with. "What this is really useful for is as a hook to get policymakers to look under the hood and see why some nations rank consistently high or consistently low, and to get them to drill down to the areas where they're falling behind, and see the ones where they're doing well," he said. DeSherbinin said the researchers have made an effort to design the index so that it measures not only nations' consumption and pollution, but their overall health and well-

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being. For instance, Niger (number 158) “hardly consumes anything,” he said; on the other hand, poverty and malnutrition are so extreme, it “can hardly be considered a healthy environment.”

Like China, India is newly industrializing, and it ranked 123rd – reflecting the strain rapid economic growth imposes on the environment, say the authors. However, Brazil and Russia, also rapidly developing, rank 62nd and 69th, suggesting that the pace of development is just one of many factors.

The EPI provides a detailed analysis for each country, showing its performance on each of the 25 basic indicators, 10 core policy categories, and two overarching objectives, of environmental public health and ecosystem vitality. In addition, each nation is benchmarked against others that are similarly situated with groupings, based on geographic regions, level of development, trading blocs and demographic characteristics. These peer group rankings make it easy to highlight leaders and laggards on an issue-by-issue basis and to identify best practices, say the authors.

The data suggest that income is a major determinant of environmental success. At every level of development, however, some countries achieve results that exceed what would be anticipated, demonstrating that policy choices also affect performance. For example, Chile, where substantial investments in environmental protection have been made, ranks 16th, while its neighbor, Argentina, which has done much less to improve pollution control and resource management, lags in 70th place. Regulatory rigor, the rule of law and good governance, and the absence of corruption also show strong correlations with high EPI scores.

The researchers say there is room for improving their measurements. The index builds on indicators drawn from international organizations such as the World Bank, the UN Development Programme, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, as well as organizations such as the World Resources Institute and University of British Columbia. But many data sets are based on reporting by national governments that is not subject to any external review or verification. Serious data gaps, moreover, limit the ability to measure performance on a number of important issues. Incomplete data resulted in the exclusion of dozens of countries from the 2010 EPI.

“ At the Copenhagen Climate Conference last month, reliable environmental performance data emerged as fundamental to global-scale policy cooperation,” said project co-leader Daniel C. Esty, director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy. “The 2010 EPI shows the potential for a much more analytically rigorous approach to environmental decision-making, but substantial investments in indicators that are systematically tracked and transparently displayed will be needed.”

Marc Levy, deputy director of CIESIN and another of the project leaders, observed, “For some critical issues such as water, international investments have actually decreased in recent years.”



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