

STATE AND TRENDS - EUROPE

G L O B A L E N V I R O N M E N T O U T L O O K

The fourth *Global Environment Outlook – environment for development (GEO-4)* assessment report is published in 2007, exactly two decades since the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) published its seminal report – *Our Common Future* – which placed sustainable development on the agenda of governments and other stakeholders. *GEO-4* is the most comprehensive UN report on the environment prepared by about 390 experts and reviewed by more than 1 000 others across the world.

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Since the time of the Brundtland report in 1987, much has been achieved to help protect Europe’s environment and reduce health impacts from severe environmental pollution. While progress has been made in decoupling economic growth from resource use and environmental pressures, per capita household consumption is steadily increasing. Poor water and urban air quality, along with a legacy of hazardous wastes, still cause substantial problems in parts of the region, affecting the health and quality of life of many people.

Environmental governance

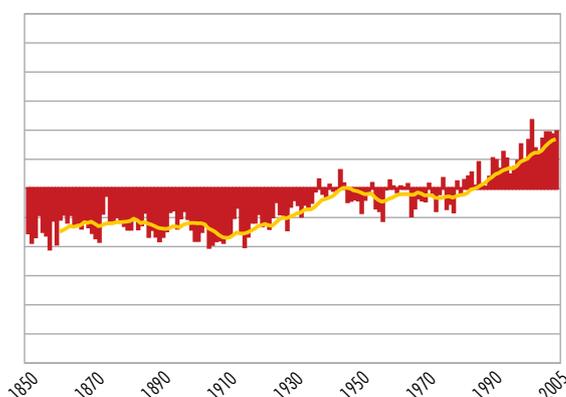
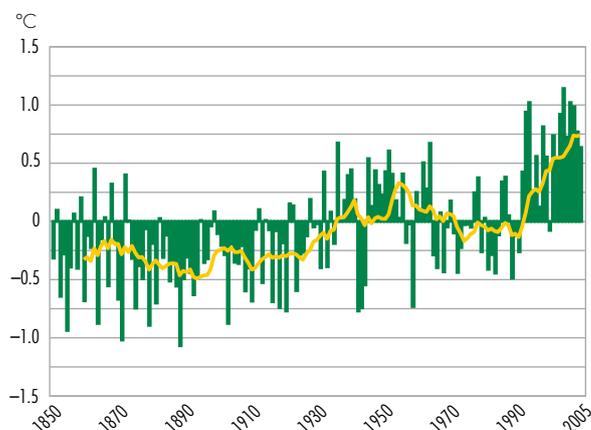
During the last decades, substantial progress in environmental protection and quality has been achieved across Europe, especially in the member states of the European Union (EU). Various environmental issues remain of concern in many parts of the region, including drinking water, urban air quality and industrial pollution. The EU, as a regional policy-making body, has emerged as a strong leader in environmental governance across much of the pan-European area, with the prospect of EU accession being an important driver of environmental policy improvements in candidate countries. Today, policies are moving

beyond technical solutions to try and address the patterns and causes of unsustainable consumption and production, the consumer society ‘life-style’ and Europe’s ecological footprint that is affecting other parts of the world.

Climate change and energy

While energy use grew at a slightly lower pace than economic activity over the past 15 years, Europe as a whole has not succeeded in stabilizing its energy consumption levels. Greenhouse gas emissions from the energy sector have been reduced in Western Europe, but since the end of the 1990s, these emissions have on average increased for the region as a whole. There exists a clear energy efficiency difference between the eastern and western parts of the European region. Annual mean temperature deviations in Europe tend to be larger than global deviations. The mean temperature in Europe is projected to increase by between 2.1°C and 4.4°C by 2080. However, growing public awareness, together with rising energy prices, have given a new political momentum to climate change policies in Europe.

Annual mean temperature deviations in Europe



European
Global

Notes: Global graph: data from CRU/UEA and Hadley Centre of UK MET Office

European graph: computed with “climate explorer” of Royal Netherlands Meteorological Institute (KNMI).

The reference period for the anomalies is the average of 1961-1990

Source IPCC

Sustainable consumption and production

Consumption and production contribute to the high (and often unsustainable) use of resources in Europe, increasing environmental degradation, depletion of natural resources and growing amounts of waste. Household consumption expenditure is steadily increasing throughout the region, with Western European households having some of the highest consumption levels in the world. Important progress in decoupling resource use from economic growth has been achieved in the wider European region, in particular in many EU countries. However, absolute reduction in resource use has not yet been achieved, and attempts to change consumption patterns have had limited success, while eco-efficiency gains are often exceeded by increased consumption levels.

In Eastern Europe in particular, accumulated hazardous waste from the Soviet era, and obsolete pesticides, remain major environmental threats.

Air quality and transport

Despite progress in reducing emissions, air pollution still poses risks for both human health and the environment. Growing numbers of motor vehicles, along with emissions from industry, power production, and households all contribute to air pollution.

In Eastern Europe, the recent trend of increasing air emissions is likely to continue due to economic recovery, with the exception of sulphur dioxide. In Southeastern Europe, emissions are stabilizing and further reductions are expected. In Western Europe, emissions of air pollutants are steadily declining as a result of effective implementation of EU air quality policies, including the introduction of catalytic converters - although sometimes the gains have been partly offset by increased road traffic and number of diesel cars.

Land use change and biodiversity loss/threats

Both intensification and land abandonment in the agricultural sector threaten biodiversity in Europe, in particular in marginal areas. Urban sprawl, infrastructure development, illegal logging and human-induced fires are also increasingly significant problems for biodiversity in the region.

Forestry in Europe is regarded as sustainable, but regional problems exist, notably illegal logging in Eastern Europe and forest fires in many parts of the region. Of the total European forest area of about 10 million km² (with nearly 80 per cent in Russia), one-quarter is primary forest, with no clearly visible indications of human activities, half is modified natural forest with little human influence, and the remaining one-quarter is heavily modified.

Climate change is an overarching pressure that is expected to become a main driver of biodiversity loss in the future, affecting productivity, growth cycles and species distribution.

Freshwater stresses: quality and quantity

For many parts of Europe the population has access to excellent water and sanitation services, and water quality overall has been improving since 1990, in part due to reductions in contaminant loads from wastewater treatment and industries. However, WHO estimates that annually in Europe, unsafe water, sanitation and hygiene results in 18 000 premature deaths, 736 000 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) and the loss of 1.18 million years of life.

Considerable water quality problems are caused by industrial and agricultural activities, poor management of water as a resource, and the disposal of sewage wastes. Agriculture is not only responsible for a large share of water pollution, but also for about one-third of water use across Europe, especially in the southern part.

Sources and credits for the information presented here are available and fully referenced in the **Fourth Global Environment Outlook - environment for development** report.



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