



## MEDIA BRIEF

# Latin America and the Caribbean focuses on Urbanization and Wildlife Management

*Nairobi, 25 October:* The teeming cities and disappearing wildlife of Latin America and the Caribbean are priorities the region must address if it is to achieve environmental security in a perilous world, the UN warns.

And a sustainable future will require intensified efforts to build a less unequal society: the region has the world's worst income inequality, and 39 per cent of urban families live below the poverty line.

The warnings come in Global Environment Outlook 4, *GEO-4*, the latest in the series of flagship reports from the Nairobi-based United Nations Environment Programme. *GEO-4* is published 20 years after the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) produced its seminal report, *Our Common Future*. *GEO-4* describes the changes since 1987, assesses the current state of global atmosphere, land, water and biodiversity, and identifies priorities for action.

*GEO-4* salutes the world's progress in tackling some relatively straightforward problems, with the environment now much closer to mainstream politics everywhere. But despite these advances, there remain the more persistent issues for which existing measures and institutional arrangements have systematically demonstrated inadequacies and where solutions are still emerging. Failure to address these persistent problems, UNEP says, may undo all the achievements so far on the simpler issues, and it may threaten humanity's survival. The report adds - "There are no major issues raised in *Our Common Future* for which the foreseeable trends are favourable." But it insists: "The objective is not to present a dark and gloomy scenario, but an urgent call for action."

*GEO-4* says the well-being of billions of people in the developing world is at risk, because of a failure to remedy the relatively simple problems which have been successfully tackled elsewhere.

It says the world as a whole is living far beyond its means. The human population is now so large that "the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available... humanity's footprint [its environmental demand] is 21.9 hectares per person while the Earth's biological capacity is, on average, only 15.7 ha/person...".

For Latin America and the Caribbean, *GEO-4* says, perhaps the greatest challenge is to design policies that aim at the sustainable management of both natural and social assets.

The environment has not yet been given the high priority status it requires. Ensuring compliance with international environmental agreements is a major challenge.

In 1995, *GEO-4* notes, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Norwegian Prime Minister who chaired the 1987 Commission, wrote: "The cost of poverty, in human suffering, in the wasteful use of human resources, and in environmental degradation, has been grossly neglected." And the report says that governments are increasingly recognizing how environmental management is closely linked to poverty and inequality.

This is the first *GEO* report in which all seven of the world's regions emphasize the potential impacts of climate change. *GEO-4* says climate change is a "global priority", demanding political will and leadership. Yet it finds "a remarkable lack of urgency", and a "woefully inadequate" global response.

Main priorities for Latin America and the Caribbean are urban growth, biodiversity threats, coastal damage and marine pollution, and vulnerability to climate change.

[www.unep.org/geo/geo4/](http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/)



Latin America and the Caribbean have very high biological diversity, with Amazonia alone believed to contain about half the world's biodiversity. This patrimony is threatened by habitat loss, land degradation, land-use change, deforestation and marine pollution. However, protected areas (as classified by IUCN) now cover 10.5 per cent of the land, and annual deforestation rates in the Amazon are falling. New efforts at protection being made, include the creation of the Meso-American Biological Corridor from southern Mexico to Panama.

The region also boasts high cultural diversity, with more than 400 different indigenous groups estimated to live in the region. They - and their traditional knowledge - are threatened by an increasingly homogeneous global market. Traditional knowledge has proven to be enormously valuable, for instance in bioprospecting and biotechnology in recent times, and has in some cases, led to what is now recognized as sustainable environmental management. The region badly needs a deep understanding of this type of knowledge, with its potential for sustainable approaches, and an adequate system of intellectual property rights.

The region contains 23.4 per cent of the world's forest cover, but is losing them fast. Trade, unplanned urbanisation and lack of land-use planning are driving their conversion to pasture and to monocultures for export and to provide biofuel.

Deforestation also affects water quantity and quality, causing more soil erosion. It harms biodiversity and is an important source of greenhouse gas emissions.

But there is good news. Integrated prevention and control programmes virtually halved deforestation in the Amazon from its 2004 figure to 13 100 square kilometres in 2006. Paraguay, which until 2004 had one of the world's highest rates of forest loss, has cut its deforestation rates in its eastern regions by 85 per cent.

Land degradation, caused mainly by water and in some places, wind erosion, affects Latin America and the Caribbean badly, but unequally. Of the whole region 15.7 per cent is affected by land degradation, with 26 per cent degraded in Mexico and Central America (Meso-America) and 14 per cent in South America.

Coastal damage is widespread - nearly a third of the coastline in North and Central America and about half that in South America's coastlines are under moderate to high threats from the impacts of development.

Extreme climate events have increased over the last 20 years in Latin America and the Caribbean: the number, frequency, duration and intensity of North Atlantic tropical storms and hurricanes are one example. Economic damage is growing, partly because more people are at risk. A lack of adaptive capabilities and the lack of observation and monitoring systems, capacity building and appropriate political, institutional and technological frameworks, hamper the region's ability to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

Epidemics once under control are re-emerging, released by rising temperatures, changes in land cover and precipitation, and falling health expenditure. Vector-borne diseases like malaria, dengue fever, yellow fever and bubonic plague now pose a greater risk.

The future will be largely determined by the decisions individuals and society make now, *GEO-4* says: "Our common future depends on our actions today, not tomorrow or some time in the future." A narrow definition of security for some is likely to mean increasing vulnerabilities for all.

For some of the world's persistent problems the damage may already be irreversible. *GEO-4* warns that tackling the underlying causes of environmental pressures often affects the vested interests of powerful groups able to influence policy decisions. The only way to address these harder-to-manage problems requires moving the environment from the periphery to the core of decision-making: environment *for* development, not development to the detriment of environment.

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## Notes to Editors

*GEO-4* is produced and published by the Division of Early Warning and Assessment of the United Nations Environment Programme. It is available from [www.unep.org/geo/geo4/](http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/)

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## Regional Highlights

Between 1990 and 2004 GDP in the region grew by about 2.9 per cent annually, noticeably lower than in other developing regions and well below the 4.3 per cent needed to meet the Millennium Development Goal on reducing extreme poverty.

Urban air pollution remains a problem. Only 14 per cent of the region's sewage is adequately treated, and in 2004 about 127 million people (from about 560 million) still lacked access to improved water and sanitation.

World biofuel output is projected to grow from 20 million tonnes of oil equivalent in 2005 to 92 million in 2030. Forest cover in the region is being lost due to the conversion of forests to pastures for livestock production, and monoculture planted forests for crops as well as to produce biofuel. And, the report notes, without significant improvement in the productivity of biofuel crops, "achieving 100 per cent of transport fuel demand from biofuels is clearly impossible."

Desertification - caused by deforestation, overgrazing and inadequate irrigation - affects 25 per cent of the region, salinization is a problem in some areas, and agricultural intensification is depleting nutrients. Only 12.4 per cent of the region's agricultural land has no fertility limitations.

Threats to marine waters include untreated sewage discharges, oil pollution, agro-chemical run-off, pollution from marine transport, hazardous waste and heavy metals, overfishing, and the introduction of alien species.

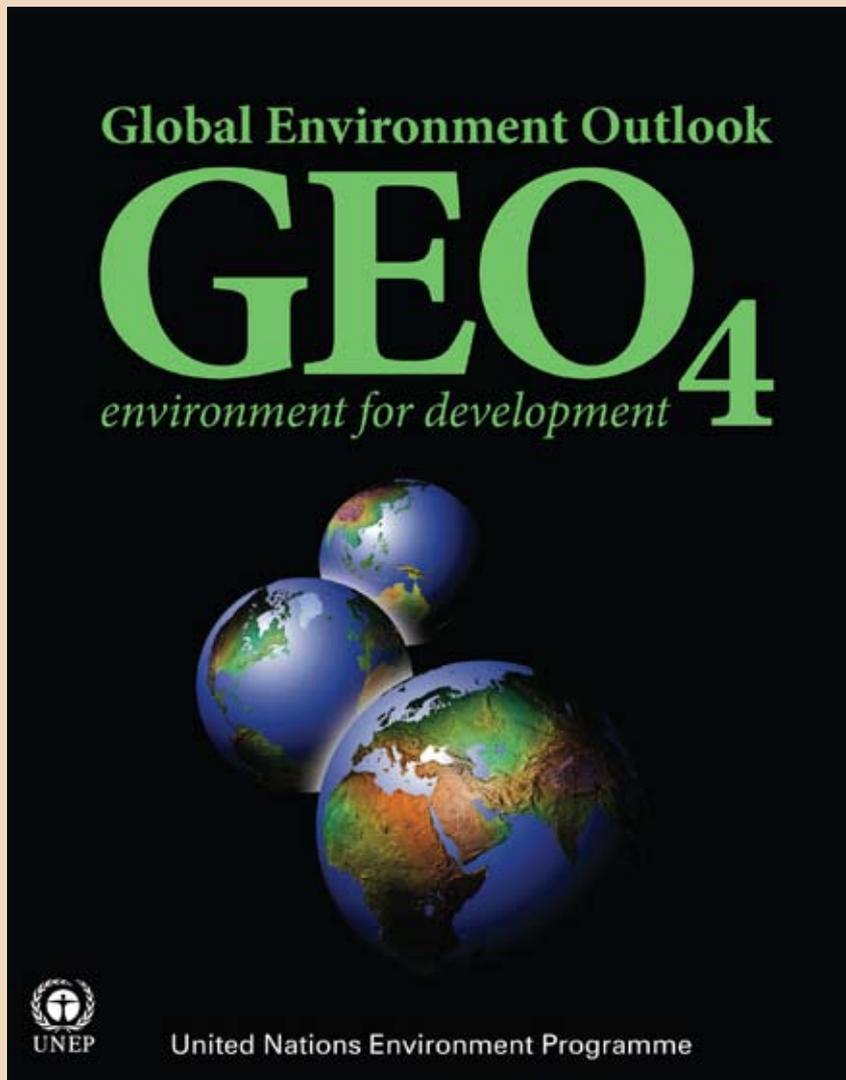
In the Caribbean 61 per cent of the coral reef area is threatened by sediments, pollution and overfishing. Coastal groundwater is being contaminated across the region. Cholera and other water-borne diseases are on the rise in coastal areas.

The region's contribution to climate change is low - just over 5 per cent of global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from a little over 8 per cent of the world's population.

Between 2000 and 2005, droughts have caused serious economic losses for more than 1.23 million people in parts of the region.

Ecuador's Antisan glacier retreated eight times faster in the 1990s than in earlier decades. In Bolivia the Chacaltava glacier has lost over half its area since 1990.





The Global Environment Outlook (GEO) is UNEP's flagship assessment process and report series. The fourth report in the series, GEO-4 provides an overview of the global and regional environmental, social and economic state-and-trends over the past two decades. It highlights the interlinkages, challenges and opportunities which the environment provides for development and human well-being. The report also presents an outlook, using four scenarios to explore plausible futures to the year 2050, as well as policy options to address present and emerging environmental issues.

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Copies of the GEO-4 report are available for download on [www.unep.org/geo/geo4/](http://www.unep.org/geo/geo4/) and on  
UNEP's official distributor's website: <http://www.earthprint.com/go.htm?to=DEW0962NA>  
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