



Report: Global biodiversity down 30 percent in 40 years

Freshwater tropical species hardest hit, says World Wildlife Fund

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NASA
"Earthrise" seen by the Apollo 8 astronauts in December 1968.

By **Stephanie Pappas** Senior Writer



The world's biodiversity is down 30 percent since the 1970s, according to a new report, with tropical species taking the biggest hit. And if humanity continues as it has been, the picture could get bleaker.



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Humanity is outstripping the Earth's resources by 50 percent — essentially using the resources of one and a half Earths every year, according to the 2012 Living Planet Report, produced by [conservation](#) agency the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Colby Loucks, the director of conservation sciences at WWF, compared humanity to bad houseguests.

said. [[50 Amazing Facts About Earth](#)]

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Burning through resources

The biannual Living Planet report is designed to call attention to the Earth's "invisible economy," said Emily McKenzie, the director of the WWF's Natural Capital Program. Natural resources — and the [rate](#) at which [humans burn through them](#) — rarely appear on policymakers' balance sheets, McKenzie said.

But humanity is essentially in debt to Mother Earth, conservationists find. As of 2008, the most recent year for which [data](#) is available, humans were outstripping Earth's biocapacity by 50 percent.

Biocapacity is the amount of renewable resources, land, and waste absorption (such as sinks for carbon dioxide) the Earth can provide. In other words, it takes the planet 1.5 years to restore what humanity burns through in a year. (The organization Global Footprint Network marks "[Earth Overshoot Day](#)" every year to draw attention to how fast humans use natural resources. In 2011, Earth Overshoot Day fell on Sept. 27, the day humans used up Earth's annual resources.)

The report scientists calculated the world's hogs when it comes to resources (called the [ecological footprint](#)) by determining each nation's productive land capacity and comparing it to the actual population and consumption per person. The United



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States has the fifth-largest ecological footprint of any nation on Earth, according to the report.

In order from most to least, the top 10 greediest [resource](#) users per capita are:

1. Qatar
2. Kuwait
3. United Arab Emirates
4. Denmark
5. United States
6. Belgium
7. Australia
8. Canada
9. The Netherlands
10. Ireland

[[See full list of top and bottom resource users](#)]

Struggling species

All of this resource use is taking a toll. The Living Planet report also tracks biodiversity and species populations across the globe. This year's report details a startling [loss of biodiversity](#) around the globe: A loss of 30 percent of biodiversity on average, meaning a major decline in the number of different species of plants, animals and other organisms. Temperate species are doing relatively well, Loucks said, but tropical species have declined by 60 percent since the 1970s. Freshwater tropical species are the hardest-hit, having declined by 70 percent in that time period.

Globally, terrestrial species declined by 25 percent between 1970 and 2008, WWF reports. Marine (non-freshwater) species declined by 20 percent.



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Many of the group's proposed solutions to [humanity's out-of-control resource use](#) center around Rio+20, the upcoming United Nations [Conference](#) on Sustainable Development set for June 20, 2012.

The meeting is designed to help create pathways for sustainable development in the future, said Kate Newman, WWF's managing director of public sector initiatives. She cited the example of Mozambique, a poor country that may be home to one of the largest natural gas fields in the world. As international companies arrive to exploit this resource, local planners are concerned about how to make sure the entire nation benefits, she said.

In the same way, global decision-makers need to think long-term, Loucks said.

"As we're approaching a planet with 9 billion people on it, we need to find a global solution," he said. "The challenge for us is this is a long-term problem. This is the Earth for millennia. We need to move beyond the election cycle, beyond the quarterly report cycle."

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