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From the Decline of Arctic Sea Ice to Trends in Energy Use

New UNEP Report Tracks the Changing Global Environment over the Past Two Decades as World Population Hits 7 Billion

New Report Lays-out the Challenges and Opportunities for Sustainable Development up to Rio+20 and beyond

Nairobi, 1 November 2011 – The environmental changes that have swept the planet over the last twenty years are spotlighted in a new compilation of statistical data by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), released today in a report entitled “Keeping Track of our Changing Environment: From Rio to Rio+20”.

The report is produced as part of UNEP’s “Global Environmental Outlook-5” (GEO -5) series, the UN’s most authoritative assessment of the state, trends and outlook of the global environment. The full GEO-5 report will be launched next May, one month ahead of the Rio+20 Conference taking place in Brazil.

UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director, Achim Steiner, said, “Today marks the deadline for governments, business and civil society to submit their submissions for how Rio+20 can deliver a transformational outcome in terms of accelerating and scaling-up sustainable development for now seven billion people”.

“The indicator report gets us all back to basics, underlining the rapid buildup of greenhouse gases to the erosion of biodiversity and the 40 per cent increase in the use of natural resources—faster than global population growth. But the report also underlines how, when the world decides to act it can dramatically alter the trajectory of hazardous trends that threaten human well-being—action to phase-out ozone damaging chemicals being a spirited and powerful example,” he added.

“Rio+20, under the two themes of a Green Economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and an institutional framework for sustainable development, can with the requisite level of leadership trigger the necessary switches that may ensure that the balance of negative versus positive trends moves from the red into the black and that the Right to Development is enjoyed by the many rather than the few,” said Mr. Steiner.

Through data, graphics and satellite images, the UNEP report offers wide-ranging information on a number of key issues:

On population

- As the world's population reaches 7 billion, urban population has grown by 45 per cent since 1992
- Yet the percentage of slum dwellers has dropped from 46 per cent in 1990 to a third in 2010, thanks to improved housing and sanitation
- The number of megacities with at least 10 million people has grown from 10 in 1992 to 21 last year – a 110 per cent increase
- 1.4 billion people globally have no access to reliable electricity or the power grid.

Climate change

- Global CO₂ emissions continue to rise due to increasing use of fossil fuels, with 80 per cent of global emissions coming from just 19 countries.
- The amount of CO₂ per US\$1 GDP has dropped by 23 per cent since 1992 underlining that some decoupling of economic growth from resource use is occurring.
- Nearly all mountain glaciers around the world are retreating and getting thinner, with severe impacts on the environment and human well-being.

- Diminishing glaciers not only influence current sea-level rise, but also threaten the well-being of approximately one-sixth of the world's population.
- Sea levels have been rising at an average rate of about 2.5 mm per year since 1992.

Energy

- Tracking energy trends since 1992, the report indicates that the contribution of renewable energy (including biomass) to the global energy supply stood at an estimated 16% in 2010.
- Solar and wind energy accounted for only 0.3% of the total global energy. Increased recognition of the need to move towards low carbon, resource efficient energy solutions can be seen in the 540% increase in investments in sustainable energy between 2004 and 2010.
- Due to the decreasing prices of the technologies and adoption of new policies, growth in biodiesel as a renewable energy source has jumped 300,000 per cent, use of solar energy has increased by nearly 30,000 per cent, wind by 6,000 per cent and biofuels by 3,500 per cent.

Resource Efficiency

- The global use of natural resources rose by over 40 per cent from 1992 to 2005. The report warns that unless concerted and rapid action is taken to curb and decouple resource depletion from economic growth, human activities may destroy the very environment that supports economies and sustains life.

Forests

- Despite the net reforestation now seen in Europe, North America and Asia Pacific, ongoing forest loss in Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean means that global forest area has decreased by 300 million hectares since 1990.

- The annual 20 per cent rise in the number of forests receiving certificates for sustainable forestry practices shows that consumers are exerting influence on timber production. However, only around 10 per cent of global forests are under certified sustainable management.
- A growing percentage of the world's forests are one that have been replanted--an area equaling the size of a country like Tanzania.

Food Security and land use

- Food production has risen by 45% since 1992. These increased yields are heavily reliant on the use of fertilizers, which as well as enriching soil fertility, can also have a negative impact on the environment, such as algal blooms in inland and marine waters.
- Land used for organic farming is growing at an annual rate of 13 per cent.

Drinking Water

- The world will meet, or even exceed, the Millennium Development Goals target on access to drinking water; indicating that by 2015 nearly 90 per cent of the population in developing regions will have access to improved sources of drinking water, up from 77 per cent in 1990.

The data compiled also indicates that environmental target-setting works best for well-defined issues such as phasing out leaded gasoline or ozone-depleting substances.

The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer, for example, used mandatory targets to phase-out the pollutants that were damaging the planet's protective shield.

Over 90 per cent of all ozone-depleting substances under the treaty were phased out between 1992 and 2009. Similarly, only a small number of countries still use leaded gasoline and they are expected to make the switch over the next year or two.

Other facts and figures from the report include:

- 13 per cent of the world's land surface, 7 per cent of its coastal waters and 1.4 percent of its oceans are protected.
- There is a growing concern that the oceans are becoming more acidic. This could have significant consequences on marine organisms which may alter species composition, disrupt marine food webs and potentially damage fishing, tourism activities.
- The ocean's pH declined from 8.11 in 1992 to 8.06 in 2007.
- The number of tanker oil spills recorded has declined in 20 years.
- Biodiversity has declined by 12 per cent at the global level and by 30 per cent in the tropics.
- Eco-tourism is growing at a rate three times faster than traditional mass-tourism.
- Plastics production has climbed by 130 per cent.

The UNEP publication also notes that many environmental issues, which were only emerging in 1992, are now firmly part of mainstream policymaking in many countries.

Some examples include:

- New Multilateral Environmental Agreements and Conventions which have been established or entered into force to address emerging global environmental issues.
- The greening of economy has taken off as a viable pathway of low-carbon, climate resilient and resource efficient economic development.
- Carbon Trading has put a monetary value on Greenhouse Gas Emissions.

- Recycling, or processing waste into new resources, is becoming policy and practice in many countries.
- Commercialization of renewable energy, with biofuels, solar and wind energy production growing.
- Chemicals Management has led to the banning of a number of deadly chemicals.
- Organic Products and eco-labeling are growing thanks to consumer demand.
- Nanotechnology is growing, especially in the fields of energy, health care, clean water and climate change.

The authors of the report point out that the lack of sufficient, solid data and monitoring systems to measure progress remains an obstacles to achieving the environmental goals set by the international community. The report highlights the missing pieces in our knowledge about the state of the environment, calling for global efforts to collect scientifically-credible data for environmental monitoring.

The Eye on Earth Summit, to be held in Abu Dhabi next month, presents one such opportunity, where scientists, policymakers and governments will work together to define the key challenges and solutions related to environmental data access and sharing.

Notes to the Editors:

Rio Earth Summit: In 1992 the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, popularly known as the Rio Earth Summit, was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, to address the state of the environment and sustainable development. The meeting yielded several important agreements, including ‘Agenda 21’, a plan of action adopted by over 178 governments to address human impacts on the environment at local, national and global levels, as well as key treaties on climate change, desertification and biodiversity. In June 2012 will be the follow up meeting or Rio+20 in Brazil.

Keeping Track of our changing environment can be found on the GEO-5 website: http://www.unep.org/GEO/pdfs/Keeping_Track.pdf

Eye on Earth Summit (Abu Dhabi / 12-15 December 2011): Facilitated by Abu Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative (AGEDI) and hosted by Abu Dhabi Environment Agency (EAD) in partnership with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Eye on Earth Summit will strengthen existing efforts for unified, global solutions to the issues that preclude access to data and information on the environment. More at: <http://www.eyeonearthsummit.org/>

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