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Report: U.S. leaving giant 'eco-footprint'

By **JONATHAN FOWLER, Associated Press**
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GENEVA - Humanity's reliance on fossil fuels, the spread of cities, the destruction of natural habitats for farmland and overexploitation of the oceans are destroying Earth's ability to sustain life, the environmental group World Wildlife Fund warned in a new report released last week.

The biggest consumers of nonrenewable natural resources are the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Kuwait, Australia and Sweden, who leave the biggest "ecological footprint," the WWF said in its regular Living Planet Report.

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Humans consume 20 percent more natural resources than the Earth can produce, the report said.

"We are spending nature's capital faster than it can regenerate," said WWF chief Claude Martin. "We are running up an ecological debt which we won't be able to pay off unless governments restore the balance between our consumption of natural resources and the Earth's ability to renew them."

But Fred Smith, president of the Washington-based Competitive Enterprise Institute and a former official of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency during the Nixon and Ford administrations, said he was skeptical. In a telephone interview, Smith said the WWF view is "static" and fails to take into account the benefits many people get from resource use.

Use of fossil fuels such as coal, gas and oil increased by almost 700 percent between 1961 and 2001, the study said.

Burning fossil fuels - in power plants and automobiles, for example - releases carbon dioxide, which experts say contributes to global warming. The planet is unable to keep pace and absorb the emissions, WWF said.

Populations of land, freshwater and marine species fell on average by 40 percent between 1970 and 2000. The report cited urbanization, forest clearance, pollution, overfishing and the introduction by humans of nonnative animals, such as cats and rats, which often drive out indigenous species.

"The question is how the world's entire population can live with the resources of one planet," said Jonathan Loh, one of the report's authors.

The study, WWF's fifth since 1998, examined the "ecological footprint" of the planet's entire population.

Most of a person's footprint is caused by the space needed to absorb the waste from energy consumption, including carbon dioxide. WWF also measured the total area of cities, roads and other infrastructure and the space required to

produce food and fiber - for clothing, for example.

"We don't just live on local resources," so the footprint is not confined to the country where consumers live, said Mathis Wackernagel, head of the Global Footprint Network, which includes WWF.

For example, Western demand for Asia's palm oil and South America's soybeans has wrecked natural habitats in those regions, so the destruction is considered part of the footprint of importing nations. The same applies to Arab oil consumed in the United States.

The world's 6.1 billion people leave a collective footprint of 33.36 billion acres, 5.44 acres per person. To allow the Earth to regenerate, the average should be no more than 4.45 acres, said WWF.

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