



The World's Cleanest Countries

Andy Stone, 04.15.09, 12:00 PM EDT

Europe, led by Switzerland, leads the way as the U.S. falls.

Costa Rica

Score: 90.5

No. 5 Overall; No. 1 in the Americas

Costa Rica's economy relies on a robust ecotourism industry, and the care it takes for its environment shows. The Central American country ranks fifth in the global Environmental Index, a rating that should only improve as it strives to become carbon-neutral by 2021. Costa Rica has avoided the deforestation that ravages some Latin American countries: the country earns a score of 97 or better in the categories of forestry, air pollution and climate change. But the country isn't as kind to its offshore environment, scoring abysmally in the marine protected areas category.

The declining health of Mother Earth has drawn growing attention over the last two decades, with countries coming together to fight a range of environmental threats, from declining fishing stocks to global warming.

Witness the [Kyoto Protocol](#), the first widely adopted set of environmental protection guidelines, which emerged during the 1990s and took effect in 2005. Kyoto led to the development of the first large-scale emissions trading market, Europe's Greenhouse Gas Emission Trading Scheme, which puts caps on carbon dioxide pollution. A similar carbon market, the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, began operating at the start of this year in 10 Eastern U.S. states.

In spite of nearly universal support for a cleaner globe (the U.S. was one of only a few countries that failed to adopt Kyoto), it's mainly the rich nations that enjoy pristine environments, according to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI). Columbia University's Center for International Earth Science Information Network and Yale University's Center for Environmental Law and Policy developed the index to highlight the cleanest countries, and give laggards the opportunity to benchmark efforts to improve their own environments and the health of their citizens.

Switzerland tops the list with an overall EPI score of 95.5 out of 100, while European countries account for 14 of the top 20 environmental performers. Europe has the infrastructure to provide clean drinking water and treat waste water, lowering the likelihood that Europeans will suffer from waterborne disease. Europe scores consistently well in EPI's environmental health ranking, which measures the effects of pollution on human health.

A second broad measure, ecosystem vitality, measures the health of fisheries, the amount of greenhouse gases a country pumps into the air and how well it preserves the diversity of its plants and animals. On this measure, the performance of developed countries diverges. Scandinavia, with its low population and vast open spaces, enjoys pristine forests and relatively little air pollution.

The U.S., once a leader in environmental protection, has failed to keep pace. "Starting 25 years ago, the United States started to fall behind in relative terms. Before that time, Europe always had dirtier air and drinking water," says Mark Levy, associate director of Columbia University's earth science center.

Then-President George H. W. Bush signed the last significant American air quality legislation in 1990, an amendment to the Clean Air Act. The U.S. scores a meager 63.5 on the ecosystem vitality scale, vs. an average score of 74.2 for the world's richest nations. The U.S.' overall EPI score is 81, putting it in 39th place on the list.