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10.29.2008

WWF says reckless consumption threatens the planet

Wed Oct 29, 2008 1:08am EDT

By Laura MacInnis

GENEVA (Reuters) - The Earth's natural resources are being depleted so quickly that "two planets" would be required to sustain current lifestyles within a generation, the conservation group WWF said on Wednesday. The Swiss-based WWF, also known as the World Wildlife Fund, said in its latest Living Planet Report that more than three quarters of the world's population lives in countries whose consumption levels are outstripping environmental renewal.

Its Living Planet Report concluded that reckless consumption of "natural capital" was endangering the world's future prosperity, with clear economic impacts including high costs for food, water and energy.

"If our demands on the planet continue to increase at the same rate, by the mid-2030s we would need the equivalent of two planets to maintain our lifestyles," said WWF International Director-General James Leape.

Jonathan Loh of the Zoological Society of London said the dramatic ecological losses from pollution, deforestation, over-fishing and land conversion were having serious impacts.

"We are acting ecologically in the same way as financial institutions have been behaving economically -- seeking immediate gratification without due regard for the consequences," Loh said in a statement accompanying the report. "The consequences of a global ecological crisis are even graver than the current economic meltdown," he said.

The report said the world's global environmental "footprint" or depletion rate now exceeds the planet's capacity to regenerate by 30 percent. On a per-country basis, the United States and China have the largest footprints, the WWF said.

The United States and Australia rank among the five countries with the largest footprints per person, along with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Denmark. The lowest five are Bangladesh, Congo, Haiti, Afghanistan and Malawi, WWF said. Regionally, only non-EU Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean remain within their "biocapacity."

Emissions from fossil fuels -- which would be targeted under a successor to the Kyoto climate change accord -- were among the top culprits cited by WWF for the big demands on the planet.

The WWF's Leape said world leaders needed to put ecological concerns at the top of their agenda and ensure the environment is factored into all decisions about consumption, development, trade, agriculture and fisheries management.

"If humanity has the will, it has the ways to live within the means of the planet, but we must recognize that the ecological credit crunch will require even bolder action than that now being mustered for the financial crisis," Leape said.

(Editing by Jon Boyle)