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Global sustainability rankings highlight Europe's leading environmental performance, but all nations are still far from critical goals

New Haven, Conn. — European countries lead the world in environmental outcomes, boosted by progress on their energy transition and other sustainability goals, according to the 2026 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), a biennial ranking that evaluates the world's countries based on key environmental indicators. But few countries are fully on track to meet the global commitment to net-zero greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2050, and progress has slowed on a range of other pollution control and natural resource management challenges, according to the new rankings, which was produced by researchers at Yale and Columbia universities.

Estonia ranks #1 in the 2026 EPI, largely due to its substantial reduction of GHG emissions in power generation over the past decade as it ramped up renewable electricity and shut down fossil fuel production. Estonia is also among the top performing countries worldwide on biodiversity and ecosystem protection.

Overall, **European countries hold all but one of the top 20 positions** in this year's comprehensive ranking, driven by high marks on environmental health and climate change mitigation, with Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Finland, and the Netherlands rounding out the top five.

The EPI, which is the most globally comprehensive analysis of countries' overall environmental performance, is produced jointly by researchers at Yale and Columbia universities. For the 2026 report, they ranked 177 countries on 47 environmental indicators across 12 issue categories representing critical sustainability challenges in environmental public health, ecosystem vitality, and climate change.

Although European countries lead this year's ranking, even the highest ranked countries face ongoing sustainability challenges, with agricultural sustainability representing a lagging category for many European countries. Other countries are also pulled down by low scores in agricultural sustainability. For example, Japan, in the 16th slot, is the sole non-European country in the top 20. But it ranks 139th in agricultural sustainability.

“If countries aim to maintain a trajectory toward net-zero emissions by 2050, they will need to continually achieve large emissions reductions, which will require additional policies in the future,” said Zach Wendling, lead author of the 2026 EPI.

Laos sits at the very bottom of the 2026 rankings, with India just one slot ahead in the 176th position. India’s very weak performance reflects critical air quality problems, continued reliance on coal-fired power, and lack of biodiversity protections, according to the researchers.

Bangladesh, Mali, and Vietnam round out the bottom five. All these nations face serious environmental degradation that represents a direct threat to human health and critical ecosystems. Some nations, however, have been able to achieve significant economic gain without environmental harm, demonstrating that economic development does not always come at environmental cost, the 2026 EPI shows. For example, both Botswana and Costa Rica have experienced strong economic growth alongside strong sustainability outcomes.

China and the United States – the world’s two biggest greenhouse gas emitters – look likely to fall far short of the global target of net-zero GHG emissions by 2050.

Overall, the United States ranks 27th, just behind Australia (25th) and ahead of Canada (29th). The U.S. score reflects strong results on environmental health issues, but under-performance on biodiversity protection and climate change metrics. Between 2014 to 2024, greenhouse gas emissions in the U.S. declined by 9.6%. But due to a very high baseline of 6.2 gigatonnes (Gt) of CO2-equivalent GHG in 2024, the EPI projections show U.S. emissions only falling to 4.9 Gt by 2050 – far short of the level required to meet the net-zero emissions target.

China sits in the bottom third of the Index at 129th place, owing to poor outcomes on climate change measures despite improvements in indoor air pollution, water sanitation, and solid waste management. China’s greenhouse gas emissions rose 17% from 2014 to 2024, from 12.1 to 14.7 Gt of CO2-equivalent GHG. While China has undertaken substantial investments in clean energy, electric vehicles, and advanced battery technologies, these gains have been dwarfed by the country’s continued reliance on coal for 56% of its electricity, threatening China’s ability to achieve net-zero emissions even though their emissions began to level off in recent years.

The 2026 EPI also demonstrates the promise of artificial intelligence (AI) technology to rapidly transform environmental metrics and sustainability tracking. Over half of the EPI’s 47 indicators now use some form of AI — including better techniques for analyzing satellite data — to unlock new insights about the state of the planet.

"Artificial intelligence and other new technologies are giving us an ever more accurate understanding of the state of the world's environmental progress, but the picture they paint should give us pause," said Dan Esty, Hillhouse Professor of Environmental Law and Policy and director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy. "Even the most high-performing countries are failing to fully tackle some of the planet's most critical sustainability challenges."

Among the AI-enabled data used to compile the 2026 EPI is a new indicator that tracks conservation of grasslands at a global scale, previously thought to be nearly impossible. This new dataset, produced by the Global Pasture Watch research consortium, shows that half of the world's grasslands are already degraded, and the remaining grasslands are under threat from both human encroachment and climate change.

"We hope that inclusion of grasslands as a critical natural resource in the 2026 EPI will draw attention to this neglected yet essential biome and provide a mechanism to hold governments accountable for their grasslands degradation and loss," said Alex de Sherbinin, co-author of the Index, from Columbia University.

The Index is available online at 9 a.m. EDT on July 9, 2026 at epi.yale.edu.

Supporting Materials (available at epi.yale.edu)

- 2026 EPI Policymakers Summary
- 2026 EPI Rankings, listing countries from 1st to 177th
- Individual country profiles

2026 Environmental Performance Index Launch Event

A launch webinar will be held on July 9, 2026 at 9:00-10:30 am EDT, featuring EPI researchers, **Andres Sutt**, Minister of Energy and the Environment, Republic of Estonia, **Raweewan Bhuridej**, Permanent Secretary of Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, Thailand, and other speakers.

To attend online, please register here: https://forms.office.com/r/j33twtZvVL

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