

April 2003

INDEX OF LEADING ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS

EIGHTH EDITION

BY STEVEN HAYWARD WITH RYAN STOWERS

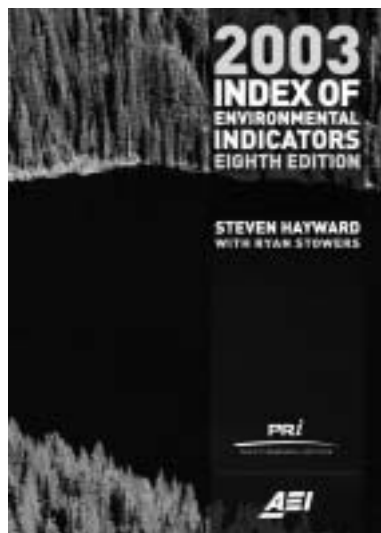
In September 2002, the U.N. World Summit on Sustainable Development gave rise to a dramatic turning point for environmental policy. The overwhelming consensus was that economic growth is a prerequisite for improving the world's environment. Watch for the impact this has on environmental policymaking.

But despite this breakthrough, many environmental issues remain as contentious as ever—climate change, sustainable development, food production, and urban growth. This year's Index provides a thorough analysis of the current scholarship on these and other issues.

It demonstrates that environmental controversies are nearly always more complicated than the popular story line. And it explains why the legal and institutional means for dealing effectively with them are rarely as obvious as we might think.

This 8th edition also introduces a new special feature—a “top 10” list of environmental news features and editorial analysis from 2002. Mainstream environmental reporting is becoming more accurate and more positive. And while many stories still fail to get the facts straight or uncritically convey the sensational claims of advocacy groups, the past year offers some outstanding examples of sound reporting.

The 2003 Index also has the annual analysis of key environmental trends, summarized below. The theme that emerges is the same as in past years—an analysis of the government data shows that environmental quality has improved continuously over the past 30 years. This is the single greatest success story in public policy in the United States.



AIR QUALITY

Air quality is one of the most widely debated environmental topics. However, data on the six pollutants regulated under the Clean Air Act show dramatic improvements in air quality. The number of days in “exceedence” of the EPA’s air quality standards has declined nearly 50 percent over the last decade, with a 60-percent drop in California alone. This section explains why the trend will continue, with even greater improvements in air quality over the next decade.

WATER QUALITY

Systematic measurement of water quality remains elusive. The U.S. Geological Survey’s most recent National Water Quality Inventory assesses only 19 percent of river and stream miles. And there is no way to extrapolate from this sample about the condition of the remaining 81 percent. It is also difficult to compare data from one state to another because they often use different indicators to assess the attainment of standards, and even may have different standards.

Nevertheless, it is clear that water quality has improved over the last 30 years. And while the change nationwide has not been dramatic, local success stories demonstrate substantial improvements.

TOXIC CHEMICALS

Trends in the output of toxic chemicals are based on the EPA’s Toxics Release Inventory (TRI), a reporting system for more than 650 chemicals. While the total output of the industries covered under the TRI has increased 40 percent

since 1991, the level of toxic releases has declined—51.2 percent since 1988. The reduction in the use of chemicals, even as industrial output and economic activity grow, is a sign of the increasing efficiency of our industrial plants and the “de-materialization” of the economy.

AMERICA'S FORESTS

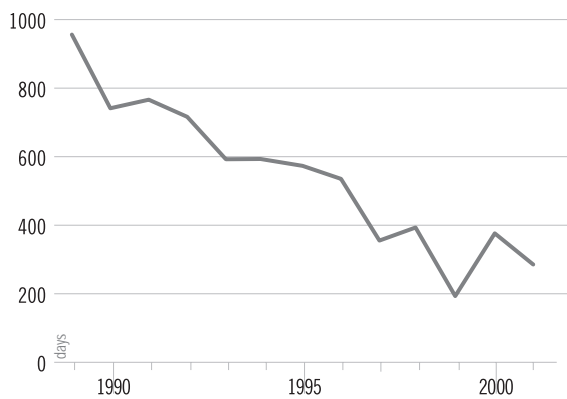
A popular misconception holds that American forests are declining. In fact, the total area of forestland stabilized around 1920, and actually increased between 1990 and 2002.

However, the Forest Service estimates that as many as 190 million acres of public land are currently at increased risk of

catastrophic fire due to overgrown conditions. The issue will remain contentious unless the federal government relinquishes its iron grip on local management of these lands.

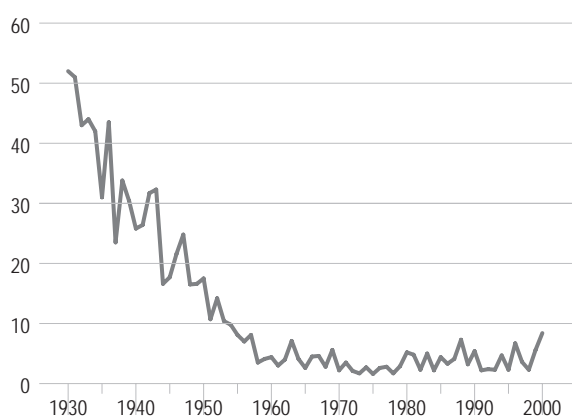
As the Forest Service has admitted, “There will likely always be debate about how this management relates to protection and maintenance of biological diversity.” Of course, this really comes down to a matter of property rights. On private lands, more aggressive thinning and management practices can proceed without legal and bureaucratic interference, and as a result they are managed in a more sustainable manner.

AIR QUALITY INDEX (AQI):
EXCEEDENCES IN CALIFORNIA, 1989–2001



source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

AMERICA'S FORESTS: MILLIONS OF ACRES
BURNED IN WILDFIRES, 1930–2000



source: U.S. Forest Service

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PRI

PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE
755 SANSOME STREET, SUITE 450
SAN FRANCISCO, CA 94111

TEL: 415.989.0833 | 800.276.7600

FAX: 415.989.2411

EMAIL: INFO@PACIFICRESEARCH.ORG

AEI

AMERICAN ENTERPRISE INSTITUTE
1150 SEVENTEENTH STREET, N.W.

WASHINGTON, DC 20036

TEL: 202.862.5800

FAX: 202.862.7177

EMAIL: INFO@AEI.ORG