



Understanding Our Environment

Assessing The State Of The Nation's Resources

(NAPSA)—When Americans want a snapshot of the national economy, they look to standard economic indicators such as the GDP and unemployment rate. A new study however says there is not enough information to assess the overall condition of the nation's environment.

A five-year effort by the H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment identified a set of key ecosystem indicators, but found alarming gaps in the data needed to make a comprehensive assessment of the nation's lands, waters and living resources.

The report found we do not have enough information to say whether our lakes, streams, and rivers are getting cleaner or dirtier, how many more species are facing extinction today than a decade ago or to measure the paving over of natural lands as our suburbs expand.

The report did provide some benchmarks, however. The amount of nitrogen carried by the Mississippi River has tripled in the last 50 years. Nitrogen from fertilizers used on farms and lawns can clog coastal water with algae, reducing oxygen levels and harming fish and shellfish.

The report also found some good news. Over the past 20 years, severe erosion on farmland has declined by about a third, dramatically increasing yields of crops such as corn and soybeans. The number of cities and suburbs with worrisome air pollution levels also dropped during the 1990s.

The goal of the study was to come up with an objective, scientifically based set of indicators, not colored by a single viewpoint on policy. The challenge was daunting. Researchers soon learned that comprehensive national data simply did not exist for many environmental indicators.

Of the 103 indicators selected, complete national data is avail-



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able for only 33 and partial data for 25. For example, there is no national standard for measuring water pollution at the seashore that is used consistently on beaches on the Atlantic, Pacific and Gulf coasts.

"This report brings a new level of clarity to the environmental debate and a better understanding of the health of our lands, waters and living resources," said Teresa Heinz, chairman of the Heinz Family Philanthropies and co-founder of the Heinz Center. "Where gaps still exist in our knowledge, we must fill them."

William Clark, a Harvard University professor and chairman of the project, said, "As a nation, we spend well over \$100 billion dollars a year preventing pollution and protecting ecosystems; we need clear indicators of the condition of our ecosystems to help evaluate the effects of these investments."

The H. John Heinz III Center for Science, Economics and the Environment launched the project at the request of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. The entire report can be found online at www.heinzctr.org. The Heinz Center is a nonprofit, non-partisan think tank created to improve the scientific and economic basis of environmental policy.