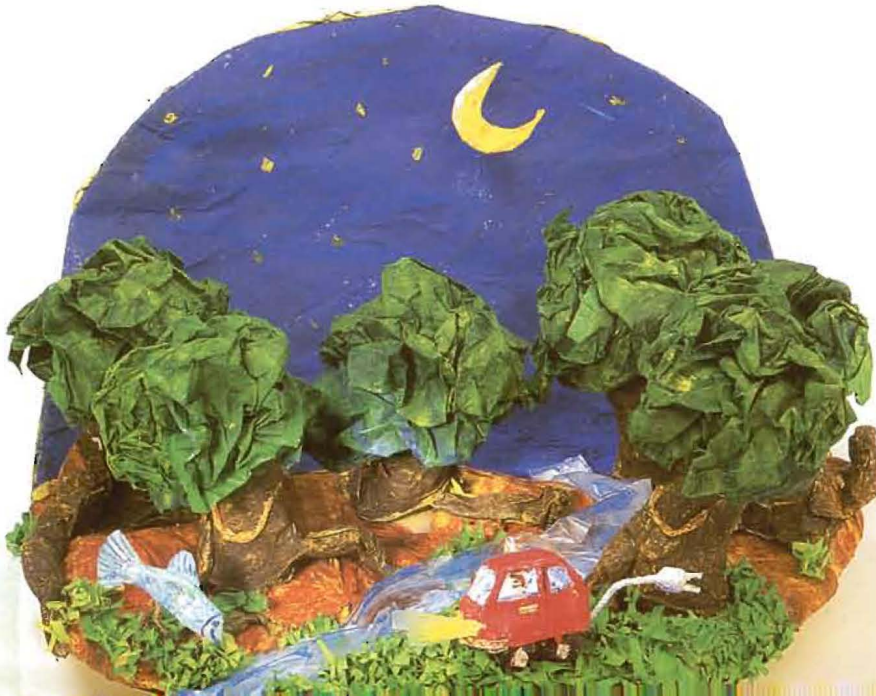


# HOW IS THE EUROPEAN UNION PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT?



: 2



Europe ...  
on the move

Europe ...  
questions and answers



This publication appears in the following official Community languages — Danish, German, Greek, English, French, Italian, Dutch and Swedish.

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EUROPE ... QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

HOW IS THE EUROPEAN UNION  
PROTECTING OUR ENVIRONMENT?





## CONTENTS

The terms **'European Community'** and **'European Union'** are used in this text to speak of that political entity which was born as the European Economic Community (or Common Market) through the Treaty of Rome in 1957 and subsequently evolved first into the European Community and finally to the European Union through the Maastricht Treaty of 1991, or the 'Treaty on European Union' as it is formally known. The legal construction of the latter treaty, in so-called 'pillars', stipulates that most policy matters fall legally under the scope of the still existing European Community (e.g. everything relating to the single market and the common agricultural policy), but two important areas, the common foreign and security policy and justice and home affairs form the second and third pillars. They have a different legal framework under the 'roof' of the European Union.

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The EU means many things to many people. For some it has been at the core of efforts to help maintain peace over the past 50 years in a continent which in the past has been riven by rivalry and suspicion. Others, however, talk of its political impotency. Why, they wonder, as a supposed political union, has it not been able to intervene effectively in the former Yugoslavia?

For many the EU is primarily about the single market and the opportunities and benefits this presents to businesses, students, pensioners and holidaymakers.

A number of people feel that it is becoming increasingly difficult to see the wood through the trees. They look back and ask whether the EU's current responsibilities really are fulfilling the visions of its founders, or whether those visions have themselves become lost in the ambiguities of post cold-war Europe? A fair question would be: What exactly is the EU for now?

Likewise, you may want to know how the EU benefits you directly, in practical terms.

The EU's institutions are inundated daily with enquiries by people hoping to get to the root of many such questions. This booklet, in a series of several, seeks to give brief but concise answers to the most frequent of these questions.

Ultimately, the EU is more than just the sum of its parts. Its Member States created it to help solve problems that cannot now be effectively tackled by countries acting alone. The point is that the EU offers opportunities, not restrictions.

## The environment

### Why have Community rules on the environment?

Pollution knows no frontiers; its effects are continental and global as well as local or regional. The disaster at Chernobyl had effects as far afield as Ireland and Greece. Rivers can pollute every country they run through.

With increasing popular and political concern for the environment, there is now worldwide recognition, underlined at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, that the balance between economic development and environmental sustainability must not get out of check, and is in danger of so doing.

In Europe, increased pollution in one Member State can in turn affect several others; furthermore, environmental issues are closely linked to the single

market, agriculture, transport, energy, industrial and social policies, among other Community concerns. With increased public concern about environmental issues, and as confidence in the capability and effectiveness of joint action at the European level has risen, Member States have come to realize that the Community has a pivotal role to play in protecting Europe's environment and accordingly, over the years, its role has been increased. They have realized that it is impossible to achieve at local or national level what can be done across the whole of the Community. Thus European environmental policy is that part of a Member State's policy which it has agreed can best be carried out at that level.



**The last major Community-wide analysis** of concerns about the environment was carried out by Eurobarometer in Spring 1995. According to this:

1. 82% of Europeans believed that environmental protection is an 'immediate and urgent problem';
2. 72% of Europeans considered that economic growth must be ensured but that the environment should also be protected;
3. Problems that Europeans consider cause serious damage to the environment are principally:
  - (i) factories releasing dangerous chemicals into the air or water (68%);
  - (ii) global pollution such as the disappearance of tropical forests, the destruction of the ozone layer and the greenhouse effect (48%);
  - (iii) oil pollution of the seas and coasts (40%); and
  - (iv) the storage of nuclear waste (39%).
4. Avoiding dropping papers or other waste on the ground (95%), saving energy (81%), sorting household waste for recycling (84%), saving tap water (82%), making less noise (79%) or buying environmentally friendly products (67%) are the first six concrete actions that Europeans have already taken in favour of the environment and/or say they are 'prepared to more often or at all';
5. In all 69% of respondents considered that decisions with respect to the environment should be taken at Community rather than at national level.

### **How seriously does the Community take the environment?**

Very seriously, but there is room for improvement. Since the Community first adopted a formal environment policy in the early 1970s over 200 laws have been passed, but the approach tended to be somewhat piecemeal. Explicit legal and political backing for environmental protection was not given until the 1987 Single European Act, which demands that full account of the environment and of the principle of sustainable growth is taken into account when proposals in all areas of Community policy are put forward for legislation.

Thus draft laws on agriculture and transport, as in other sectors, must be assessed for their environmental impact before being submitted for adoption to Member governments. The 'greening' of the CAP and the empha-

sis on high-speed railways in the trans-European network system is evidence that the environmental message is getting across.

Environmental considerations are also entering the mainstream of Community life through the harnessing of market forces and in the targetting of behavioural patterns of producers and consumers. In this way people can vote with their wallets — an approach that could be highly successful if public opinion is truly as strong on these issues as it appears. The Community's 'Eco-label' scheme is one such example, its voluntary eco-management and audit scheme for manufacturing industries is another.

On a wider scale the Community takes particular interest in climate change, global warming and the greenhouse effect. The Community is responsible for 16% of global emissions of carbon dioxide. A proposal for a CO<sub>2</sub>/energy tax to remedy this was not acceptable to some Member States, to whom it poses serious short-term problems; others are not yet ready to make the switch from taxation on labour to imposing taxes on natural resources.

However, the Community also uses other instruments to help reduce emissions and waste. The SAVE II programme, for instance, promotes energy efficiency, the Joule/Thermie programmes encourage new non-nuclear energies, and projects to increase the fuel-efficiency of vehicles and to develop alternative fuels and engine systems are also being funded.

The European Investment Bank (EIB), committed to the European Union's objective to improve the environment, is a major source of finance for environmental investment projects. Over the past five years (1991-95), the EIB provided some ECU 22 billion for the environment within the European Union of which over ECU 6 billion was in 1995 (40% up, to ECU 4.9 billion in 1994). The Bank's loans encompass a broad spectrum of environmental schemes such as water conservation and management, waste water treatment of which many loan recipients are municipal sewerage and sewage treatment works, domestic and industrial solid waste collection and processing, effluent treatment from industrial plants, measures to combat



Several European directives have made the use of catalytic converters compulsory on cars in order to reduce pollution. In 1990 the EU set a target of stabilizing carbon dioxide emissions at 1990 levels by the year 2000. Figures from the EU's statistical office released in April 1996 show that in 1994 emissions fell for the third year in a row. Transport accounts for a quarter of all emissions and here the trend is still upwards — by 7.6% between 1990 and 1994. This was mainly the result of a 7.2% rise in the road transport share. Air transport emissions were up even more — by 13.3%.

#### Carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuel combustion in the European Union

	Total CO <sub>2</sub> emissions (in million tonnes)		% change 1990-94
	1990	1994	
EUR 15	3 188	3 103	-2.7
EUR 12	3 025	2 929	-3.2
Belgium	111	117	+5.9
Denmark	53	63	+18.9
Germany	992	897	-9.5
Greece	73	78	+6.7
Spain	209	229	+9.5
France	368	349	-5.0
Ireland	31	32	+3.3
Italy	402	393	-2.2
Luxembourg	12	12	-2.8
Netherlands	157	164	+4.9
Austria	58	57	-1.6
Portugal	40	45	+13.8
Finland	53	61	+13.9
Sweden	52	56	+7.5
United Kingdom	579	550	-5.0



atmospheric pollution, urban development, and schemes combating soil erosion and flooding. Outside the Union, where the EIB helps implement the EU's cooperation policy with some 120 countries throughout the world, most EIB lending for the environment is in water catchment, treatment and supply.

**Some say that the Community's environmental policies are inadequate to meet the adverse effects of economic development on human health and the ecosystem. How true is this?**

For an environmental policy of sustainable development to be effective, it needs to be treated not just as an economic add-on, but as a principle in its own right, a goal the Community has been working towards. The European

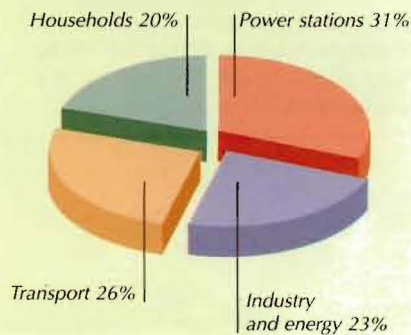
Commission recognized this in its White Paper 'Growth, competitiveness and employment' of December 1993, in which it recognized that short- and long-term recommendations to overcome recession and unemployment should also work towards correcting the inefficient and excessive use of natural resources.

Even so, environmental law must also be implemented and enforced evenly across the Community. This is not the case. Why? For one, there is evidence that differing national legislation is being used to subtly protect national industries and therefore distorts trade in the single market. This is especially true of the chemical and packaging industries. Equally, labelling requirements are much stricter in some countries than in others, causing problems for exporters.

Secondly, as a result of other pressures, environmental policy is in danger of being downgraded in some Member States. Uneven levels of economic development and prosperity might be considered more important. The need to combat unemployment in most Member States has also become a political priority.

**CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by sector 1994**

Emissions by sector	% change 1990-1994
EU total	-2.7
Thermal power stations	-4.4
Industry and energy branch	-7.7
Transport	+7.6
Households etc.	-8.3





**Community environmental policy** has been developed through a series of 'Environmental action programmes'. Early programmes concentrated on remedial measures such as reducing pollution levels in fresh and sea water, regulating the maximum amount of lead in fuel or the emissions of sulphur and nitrogen dioxides. Since then a more proactive approach has been adopted, including encouraging the use of less damaging energy resources and enforcing the recycling of waste, emphasizing the importance of conserving natural resources and designating areas of conservation for the protection of natural habitats such as forests, peatlands, marshes and dunes.

To complement this, Community environmental policy must now abide by a number of core principles, namely that: the prevention of environmental damage is better than the cure, the polluter should pay and that damage should be rectified at source. Central to all Community environmental legislation, these principles have since underpinned a number of directives agreed under the Community's action programmes.

Until the early 1990s the Community relied almost exclusively on legislation and controls involving government and industry. In short, the approach was one of 'thou shalt not'. However, under the current 'Towards sustainability' action programme the emphasis has switched towards shared responsibility between public authorities, public and private enterprises and the general public, the idea being to achieve a much wider and more active involvement in environmental affairs, with greater use of market forces. In this way, the approach is now to encourage and convince.

## How can the Community make its environmental policies more effective?

Clearly, a balance needs to be struck between economic growth and sustainable development, between costs to business and costs to the environment. At the same time the smooth functioning of the single market must be ensured, while making sure that invisible national barriers to trade are not erected, nor that higher national standards unwittingly act as such.

It has become clear that the enforcement and monitoring of Community environmental legislation needs to be tightened, while seeing to it that regulation is as unbureaucratic as possible and easy to apply. This has not always been the case in the past; the revision of some of the water directives is evidence that the Community wants simpler, and not overly costly, legislation. Equally, with the more active involvement of the European Parliament in the Community's environmental affairs, and with the European Commission concentrating more and more on monitoring rather than on issuing new proposals for legislation, enforcement and monitoring will now take centre stage.

The Community also needs to strengthen its international role on environmental and sustainable development issues and make sure it sets an example to developing countries which are soon to experience many of the same problems. A recently agreed ban on the export of hazardous waste for recycling to developing countries as from 1998 is a step in the right direction. Its commitment to phase out chlorohydrocarbons (CFCs) by 1996, ahead of the target date set by the Montreal Protocol is another.



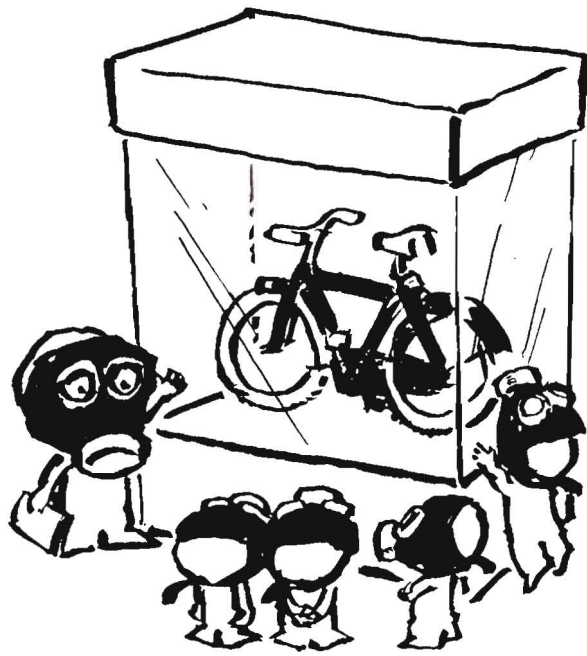
*A cleaner environment  
is not only the aim  
of EU legislation.  
It means that everybody  
has to help.*

It is possible that the Intergovernmental Conference in 1996 will provide an opportunity to put the environment and sustainable development to the

top of the agenda; the Reflection Group has already pointed out the need for this to happen.

**The new European Environment Agency (EEA)**, located in Copenhagen, has been set up to provide independent, objective, reliable and comparative information on the state of Europe's environment. The agency is exceptional among institutions set up by the Community in that its membership extends beyond the European Union to Norway and Iceland, with Switzerland and a number of Central and East European countries expected to join soon.

The role of the EEA is to make sure that the Member States and the public are properly informed, to monitor and evaluate environmental policies and to highlight inadequacies relating to information and the implementation of legislation. It will publish periodic reports on the state of the environment, and is currently looking at a range of issues including air quality and nature conservation.



**Is the single market and the increased opportunities for business compatible with environmental protection, or does it simply result in more red tape?**

They are compatible, for a number of reasons. Firstly, one of the explicit aims of the single market is to achieve a 'sustainable and non-inflationary growth' which respects the environment. At the core of the single market lie the principles of competitiveness and efficiency, as opposed to waste, bureaucracy and industrial inertia. At the same time, high national incomes, which the single market will sustain and improve, can provide the resources necessary to invest in cleaning-up pollution and conserving energy.

Secondly, the dismantling of trade barriers encourages a levelling-up of standards. An EU Cohesion Fund set up under the Maastricht Treaty should help this process, enabling the four least developed Member States to integrate more closely with the rest of the single market, chiefly by helping pay for transport and environment infrastructure projects.

Thirdly, environmental issues can be brought directly into people's lives through the market place itself; with the single market a tremendous forum has been created for environmentally friendly goods and entrepreneurs. The Community's 'Eco-label' scheme is one such example.

At the same time the Community is aware that environmental legislation can impose considerable costs on business, and is undertaking a comprehensive revision of a number of directives so that they become less onerous and more flexible. A number of water directives are being looked at again in this light. It also forms the basis of the approach being taken by the European Commission in other sectors, for instance waste.



**The 'Eco-Label'** has been adopted by European and national authorities in order to distinguish products meeting strict Community environmental standards, and is awarded by independent national authorities. Each product must pass a 'cradle-to-grave' analysis of their production, marketing, use and dispersal.

Its usage is not yet as widespread as the CE mark, chiefly as it was initially restricted to washing machines and dishwashers. Eco-labelling has now been expanded to a new range of products, including toilet paper, kitchen towels, laundry detergents and household paints and varnishes, meaning the scheme will become much more visible. Standards for refrigerators, lightbulbs, hairsprays, shoes and textiles are being finalized at the time of publication.

### **Does the single market encourage the free movement of waste?**

Waste is a commercial commodity as well as a by-product in need of disposal. Different categories of waste need to be dealt with appropriately. For instance, much waste cannot be treated at the place of production or collection and therefore may have to cross an internal border for storage, treatment, reconditioning or recycling. Some, however, is dangerous and/or toxic waste whose disposal must guarantee a high level of protection for the environment and public health. Strict rules on the transport and storage of waste are therefore necessary across the Community. This, then, is an example of the free movement of goods bound by common Community rules acts as a safeguard against unauthorized dumping.

European Commission

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