Our children's legacy

What kind of environment do we want to live in? What kind of environment do we want our children and grandchildren to live in? These fundamental questions form the starting point for the European Union’s Sixth Environmental Action Programme: Environment 2010: our future, our choice.

All of us believe that the air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat should be free of harmful pollutants. We want to avoid the threats of climate change. We want to see the countryside that we love protected and enhanced.

Yet pressures on our environment are increasing. We live in a time of unprecedented economic development. People expect ever-higher standards of living which are swallowing up the earth’s resources more quickly than they can be replaced. Colossal problems with waste and contamination of food, air and water are being created by wasteful business and commercial practices. The quality of the countryside is being eroded too, through development and intensive farming. Globally our insatiable demand for energy is tipping the balance of the weather systems for the whole world. Climate change and rising sea levels are now accepted scientific facts but the long-term impacts of global warming are still largely unknown.

We have made progress in dealing with these issues over the last 30 years. Since the 1970s the European Union (EU) has put into place measures to protect the environment. EU policies have led to a steady improvement of the quality of the environment, and thus our quality of life. However, as the pace of development continues to accelerate much remains to be done even if we are just to keep up.

What has the European Union done for the environment?

The European Union takes the environmental challenge very seriously. In 1997, the Amsterdam Treaty enshrined sustainable development into the EC Treaty. This means that environmental and social impacts are now important considerations in all new European policy no matter what area they address – agriculture, enterprise, employment, energy and transport, or external and regional policy.

The EU periodically sets out its plans in Environmental Action Programmes (EAP). The first EAP was launched in 1973 and brought in significant improvements in water and air quality.

With the creation of the single market in the 1980s, the aim became to balance environmental concerns with on-going economic integration.

The Fifth Environmental Action Programme in the 1990s responded to the Rio Earth Summit as the concept of sustainable development came to the fore. As a more long-term approach, sustainable development seeks to turn the usual thinking on the environment on its head. It transforms environmental objectives into business opportunities, rather than just bringing heavy burdens to business and consumers, and it acts as a motor to drive economic performance. Economic and fiscal means are combined to encourage greener practices and to encourage more consensus-based policymaking.

The Sixth Environmental Action Programme is the EU’s active response to meeting the crucial challenge of the environment over the next decade. Sustainable development is still very much at the core of the European approach.
How Europe can lead the way

The creation of the European Union is an unprecedented development in world politics. A group of independent nations are joining together to further common interests based on democracy and ever-closer co-operation. The protection of the environment is not just a national, or even an EU, concern but a pressing global issue that demands international co-operation towards shared aims and objectives. Without this kind of co-operation between neighbours and across continents, individual nations will have limited success in protecting their own natural environments. This intensive level of co-operation is even more vital if the market conditions to promote sustainable development are to be created.

The European Union is at the forefront of such developments. The internal market allows people, goods and services to move freely across borders, but this runs in parallel with a concerted environmental strategy based on participation and partnership. The EU is cultivating strategy with a long-term view that is free of the dominance of narrow sectoral interests. In short, the environment worldwide can reap many benefits from the input of EU thinking.

Beyond Europe's borders - EU enlargement and the international dimension

The new Action Programme will cover the period of EU expansion with up to 10 new countries joining, mainly from Eastern Europe. Naturally the Action Programme will apply to these new EU Members who in many cases have serious environmental legacies to contend with. The EU is paying attention to grooming these future members through intensified dialogue with the candidates’ administrations, with environmental NGOs and the business communities. With the expansion of the EU it is vital that the impetus in improving environmental standards be maintained and strengthened.

In the same way environmental policy is a worldwide concern and many of the EU’s actions have environmental impact outside Europe’s own borders. Trade agreements, overseas investment and development aid all need to be carefully examined and modified with environmental impact in mind.

The 6th Environmental Action Programme: mapping a path for the decade

The Sixth EU Environmental Action Programme defines the objectives and priorities of EU environmental policy over the critical period up to 2012 and beyond. It describes how EU strategy on sustainable development can be implemented for the long-term health, even viability, of human life on the planet.

It was clear from the previous Action Programme that environmental action needs to be fine-tuned. The new Programme will focus on:

- **Implementation** - regulation needs to be far more rigorously applied across the EU Member States.
- **Integration** - environmental concerns need to be better integrated into other economic and social policies that put pressure on the environment.
- **Ownership** - policy making needs to involve a much wider range of people - not just big business but consumers, citizens, young and old people, NGOs.

Within the Programme there is an increased focus on market-based incentives – ‘greening’ the market, helping companies to take advantage of new environmental business opportunities and helping them benefit economically from implementing high environmental standards.

Environmental action under the Sixth Action Programme rests on long-term and active operational principles:

- **Subsidiarity** - those most closely affected should be active in making decisions.
- **Diversity** - each place has unique local conditions and these need to be recognised.
- **Polluter-pays** - responsibility has to be taken for environmental damage which will lead to more accurate pricing of goods and services.
- **Precautionary principle and preventative action** - action needs to be taken to head off dangers before they happen.
- **Rectification of pollution at source** - cleaner technologies offer a new business opportunity.

What are the Action Programme’s main priorities?

The Action Programme focuses on four main areas for urgent action:

- **Climate change**

The EU is determined to limit emissions of greenhouse gases and avoid the dangers of climate change. The
first step is meeting the Kyoto obligations of reducing levels of emissions by 8% of 1990 levels by 2008-2012. This already ambitious target must be followed by even greater reductions. In the long term, a 70% reduction of greenhouse gas emissions as compared with 1990 levels will be needed if we are to avoid the very real danger of global warming.

To achieve such cuts, the Programme is clear about the action that needs to be taken:

- Structural changes - especially in the transport and energy sectors.
- Energy subsidies reviewed to support climate change objectives.
- Co-operation with industry to improve energy-efficiency and the use of renewable energy.
- Creating an EU-wide emissions trading scheme.
- Research and technological development for cleaner safer technologies.
- Awareness-raising among citizens on responsible consumption.

Protecting nature and bio-diversity

The EU’s objective is to protect and restore natural systems and halt the loss of bio-diversity both in the EU and globally. Many habitats and animal species are under threat and extinction is taking place at an alarming rate. The Action Programme puts forward a whole range of actions including:

- Development of the Natura 2000 conservation network.
- Creation of a set of sectoral bio-diversity action plans.
- Extension of Natura 2000 to cover the marine environment with a range of new measures.
- Integration of conservation and bio-diversity into commercial and development co-operation policies.
- Co-operation of Member States for full implementation of EU legislation, in particular in the areas of water and air.
- More attention to agricultural and regional policies to protect and restore landscapes.
- New EU action to protect the soil.
- Reinforcement of controls on labelling, monitoring and traceability of genetically modified organisms.
- The sustainable development of forests.
- Action to prevent major accidents involving dangerous substances.
- Better co-ordination of Member States’ responses to accidents and natural disasters.
- Proposals on the prevention of industrial and mining accidents.

Dealing with links between environment and health

There is increasing evidence that human health is affected by air, noise and water pollution, as well as by dangerous chemicals. The Programme aims to clean up these contaminants and is looking to develop a more global approach to the problems of contamination and human health.

The Programme seeks to:

- Identify risks to human health and to implement the necessary preventative measures.
- Introduce environment and health priorities into other policies.
- Protect particularly vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly.
- Implement EU law relating to water and noise pollution.
- Create a strategy to monitor air quality and identify future action.
- Fundamental overhaul of the EU system for managing chemical risk.
- Strategy for banning or limiting the use of the most hazardous pesticides.

Promoting sustainable use of natural resources and the management of waste

The planet’s resources, especially renewable resources such as soil, water, air and timber, are under severe pressure. The target is to move towards exploiting both renewable and non-renewable resources in an environmentally sustainable way. A strategy on the sustainable use of resources will aim both to increase efficiency and to reduce consumption. To this end the Action Programme is promoting:

- the removal of counter-productive subsidies;
- resource efficiency through Integrated Product Policy (concentrating on product life cycles), eco-labelling schemes (highlighting environmentally friendly products) and environmental assessment schemes (such measures will boost the competitiveness of industry through cleaner production at lower cost);
- decoupling of waste generation from economic growth;
- targets to reduce waste;
- a strategy for waste prevention and recycling;
- improved waste management schemes.
What is the new EU approach?

The Programme sets out five key avenues to pursue its priorities:

- **Implementation of existing environmental legislation**

Implementation is naturally key to effective legislation. In order to improve the record, vigorous legal action through the European Court of Justice will be combined with support for best practices and a policy of public information to ‘name, fame and shame’ Member States. Environmental inspection standards will be tightened. Support will also be given to the network on Implementation and Enforcement of Environmental Law (IMPEL), an informal network of environmental authorities in the Member States which is now being extended to include the countries preparing to join the EU. New initiatives are being prepared to combat environmental crimes.

- **Environmental concerns in all relevant policy areas**

The EU is making sure that all European policy initiatives mainstream environmental concerns. Therefore all Commission policy ideas will be fully assessed with environmental considerations. The Action Programme sets out ways of doing this - additional integration mechanisms within EU institutions and implementing Treaty requirements. Progress will be measured through clear indicators and benchmarking systems.

- **Working closely with business and consumers**

Closer dialogue between public bodies, business and consumers will contribute to sustainable production and consumption patterns. Business must be encouraged to innovate by, for example, seizing commercial opportunities offered by clean technologies.

The business sector should be actively encouraged to be more environmentally benign and not just penalised for failure. Environmental performance reward schemes for companies are being planned and wider implementation of the EU’s Eco-Management and Audit Scheme (EMAS) is encouraged to promote improvement of the environmental performance of European organisations. The Programme advocates new legislation to implement the polluter pays principle and explores the key elements needed to make this regime effective.

- **Ensuring better and more accessible information on the environment for citizens**

Citizens make daily decisions that directly or indirectly impact the environment. Better quality and more easily accessible information will help to shape opinions and thus decisions.

- **Developing a more environmentally conscious attitude towards land use**

Decisions on land use planning and management can have a major influence on the environment, leading to fragmentation of the countryside and pressure in urban areas. The Commission will publish a communication on the importance of integrating environmental policies into land-use planning and management. It will work on improving the implementation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Directive. Support will be provided by promoting best practice and through the Structural Funds and other EU policies.

- **Keeping an eye on the programme - monitoring and reporting**

The Environmental Action Programme needs to be monitored constantly to make sure that it is effective. The Programme will be reviewed in 2005/2006 and updated, as necessary, to take account of the latest developments and information. The Commission will report annually on the thematic strategies to the European Parliament and the Council. A final assessment will be produced as the Programme draws to a close.

It is of utmost importance that when we come round to the Seventh Environmental Action Programme at the end of the decade we will be contemplating a transformed ecological landscape that offers a confident future to young people looking forward to long and healthy lives. Otherwise it may well be too late.

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