

## Climbing up the greens rankings

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To be in the top 10 internationally is no easy feat, especially in matters as pervasive as the environment.

A recent nation-by-nation study of environment standards jointly carried out by reputable US universities Yale and Colombia has put Malaysia in ninth place among 133 countries.

It looks like the Government's about environmental protection, as emphasized in the recent budget, is a good start.

Officially named the 2006 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), it was formally released during the World Economic Forum in Davos on Jan 26.

Based on a maximum scale of 100, New Zealand are tops with an overall score of 88 points, followed closely by Sweden and Finland with 87.8 and 87 points respectively.



**CLOSER TO NATURE:** The Government and people from all walks of life are becoming more aware of the importance of preserving the environment.

Others in top 10 are Czech Republic (86), Britain (85.6), Australia (85.2), Denmark (84.5), Canada (84), Malaysia (83.3) and Ireland (83.3).

Malaysia was ranked No 38 in the 2005 rankings.

Only six nations achieved 85 percent in meeting a set of environmental goals.

Malaysia, the only Asian country in the Top 10, ahead of Japan which is five places behind, Taiwan (24) and South Korea (42).

Other Asean countries listed among the top 100 were the Philippines (55), Thailand (61), Indonesia (72),

Myanmar (88) and Vietnam (99).

The EPI used a different methodology from the earlier Environment Sustainability Index (ESI) issued in 2002 and 2005, designed to focus more attention on government policies.

For example, Britain which ranked 65th in the last year's ESI, moved up to fifth in the latest study.

Among the reasons for the earlier low ranking was that the Britain of old cut down almost all its trees to build ships since 500 years ago.

The EPI thus is said to provide a powerful tool for improving policy-making and shifting environmental decision-making onto firmer analytic foundations.

Derived from a careful review of the environmental literature, these twin goals (that is, to reduce environmental stresses on human health and to protect ecosystem vitality) reportedly mirror the priorities expressed by policymakers, most notably the environmental dimension of the United Nation's Millennium Development Goals.

Environmental health and ecosystem vitality are gauged using 16 indicator data tracked in six established policy categories: Environmental Health, Air Quality, Water Resources, Biodiversity and Habitat, Productive Natural Resources and Sustainable Energy.

It also includes a score on habitat and biodiversity as a form of habitat protection.

Among the six policy categories, Malaysia is strongest in the water resources but weakest in Sustainable Energy, and Biodiversity and Habitat.

In this respect, it is interesting to recall that even in the 2005 ESI presented in Davos at the WEF last year, Malaysia was listed as number 110 from among 146 countries on indicators such as Biodiversity, 108 for Natural Resource Management, and at 94 for Reducing Environmental Stress.

All these are further indicative of our weaknesses, although for Environmental Governance, Malaysia scored a relatively higher position of 47, giving an overall ranking of 38.

Malaysia can and must do more to improve its international standing next year.

The ESI, which is a composite index tracking a diverse set of socioeconomic, environmental, and institutional indicators that characterize and influence environmental sustainability at the national scale, has several important distinctions from the EPI.

Notably, it provides a gauge of a country's long-term environment trajectory. Constructed around the concept of "sustainability", it reportedly tracks the environment past, present, and future, while at the same time attempts to forecast on a society's ability to change negative trends.

Unlike ESI, perhaps most significantly, the EPI measures performance of a country against an absolute target established by international agreements, national standards or scientific consensus.

It is based on actual environmental results measured on a proximity-to-target basis.

According to the study, based on its approach and more comprehensive data, the EPI is expected to be of use for global-scale aggregation, showing how close the world is to environmental sustainability.

This is contrast to the ESI which is based on comparisons between countries, and provides only a relative measure of environmental performance.

Moreover, the EPI focuses narrowly on areas with government control, while the ESI tracks a broader set of factors affecting sustainability.

While both indices complement each other, they are designed with different objectives in mind.

The EPI nevertheless is said to provide a more refined picture of a country's current environmental performance.

After all, the EPI issue-by-issue and aggregate ranking facilitate cross-country comparisons, both globally and within relevant peer groups.

It is thus apparent that the countries ranked top in the EPI do commit significant resources and effort to environmental protection as reflected in strong performance across most of the policy categories.

In contrast, those lagging behind invested little in environmental protection, including adequate pollution control

and systematic natural resource management.

While this may be expected for the underdeveloped nations in the African continent, it is baffling when it comes to the world's most powerful economy, the United States placed 28th, behind most Western European countries.

We cannot help but support the authors of study in urging the American public and Government to give serious attention to the finding produced by two of their finest universities.

Instead of spending billion of dollars on wars and military adventures, the US should spend more to pre-emptively strike at the worsening environment problem that is fast invading the country.

This include critical issues of renewable energy, greenhouse gas emissions and water resources.

To quote the dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies:

"The lagging performance of the United States on environmental issues – particularly on energy and climate change – signal trouble not only for the American people, but for the whole world."

As for Malaysia, it must remain exemplary at all cost for its coming generations.

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