



## **Global Footprint Network Response to the 2007 DEFRA-commissioned report on the value of the Ecological Footprint for UK policy use.**

In 2007, the UK Department for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs (Defra) commissioned a study, conducted by independent consultancy Risk & Policy Analysis Ltd., to assess recent developments in Ecological Footprinting methodologies and to provide a focus on the practical use of Ecological Footprinting. The study aimed to analyse developments in Ecological Footprint methodologies since 2004 and assess the value of using the Ecological Footprint in policy-making in the UK. The [final report](#), *A review of recent developments in, and the practical use of, ecological footprinting methodologies*, was released in late 2007.

Global Footprint Network congratulates DEFRA on its decision to develop policies and programmes for the implementation of sustainable consumption and production in the UK, and its commitment to reviewing the value of the Ecological Footprint as a national policy indicator. DEFRA's recognition that sustainability cannot occur without the reality of resource limits being firstly acknowledged and secondly acted upon, is encouraging for the future of sustainability policy. In light of the UK government's commitment to developing policies and programmes for sustainable consumption and production, Global Footprint Network regrets that the Ecological Footprint has been rejected as an appropriate indicator. The following paragraphs highlight our main concerns with the report's conclusions.

Ensuring resource use within the limits that the planet can supply is a minimum requirement for sustainable development. All other aspects of sustainability, such as the degradation of land, sustainable economies, and adequate societal stability, hinge upon this minimum requirement being met. The Ecological Footprint is presently the only indicator available which provides a tangible measure of human demand on natural resources (consumption) **and** the available supply of natural resources at all scales, from global down to national and sub-national scales. It specifically addresses the research question "how much of the Earth's biological capacity is occupied by human activity?" and it is still alone in attempting to answer this most fundamental question of sustainability. As Global Footprint Network declares in its communication, much research can still be done to improve the resolution of the Ecological Footprint's answer to this question. Yet, despite the data and even methodological limitations that have been highlighted in the report commissioned by DEFRA, there exists no other established approach which can provide an alternative assessment of resource consumption within the global context of both total resource availability and consumption. Without this type of information, there is no guidepost for developing appropriate policy for the UK while measuring its effectiveness. It is the equivalent to managing financial assets without bookkeeping.

Many of the report's criticisms of the Ecological Footprint are actually criticism of the quality of its underlying data. Global Footprint Network recognizes that the current calculations can, and are, being improved, but it is crucial to note that our results represent only the best available data today. As with any calculation system, Footprint accounts are subject to uncertainty in source data, calculation parameters, and methodological decisions of its source data, which for the National Footprint Accounts comes primarily from UN, FAO, IEA, and ComTrade data sets. For

most nations, better data on trade, energy intensities, and carbon sequestration (to name a few points of critique in the report) simply does not yet exist. Thus, Global Footprint Network and its partners are actively researching and constantly improving our National Footprint Accounts data with limited resources. Global Footprint Network seeks government support and research collaborations from groups, such as DEFRA, for the very purpose of improving the resolution and accuracy of our national data beyond what existing national commodity and trade data can offer.

Regarding methodological critiques, Global Footprint Network and the National Footprint Accounts Committees are actively engaged in an ongoing process of updating methodology to match best current research and committee decisions. Many of the methodological issues raised in the commissioned report (such as the calculation methods for nuclear and carbon Footprints, sub-national Footprint methods, and the value of dynamic Footprint methodologies) have been addressed or tagged for review by Global Footprint Network's National Accounts Improvement Project, or as part of the next round of Ecological Footprint standards. For details on plans for National Footprint Accounts methodological updates and improvements see [Kitzes et al 2007](#). For further information on Footprint standards see [www.footprintstandards.org](http://www.footprintstandards.org).

In addition, Global Footprint Network contends that the Ecological Footprint in its current form still provides vitally important information that can inform policy change towards sustainable consumption and production. Whether global overshoot is 25% or perhaps larger, as our approach is to err on the side of smaller overshoot in case of data uncertainty, the fact remains that global overshoot exists, and that it continues to increase. It also remains true that globally, the majority of consumption is taking place in North America, Western Europe, and eastern Asia. Foregoing use of Ecological Footprint data in its current form cannot be justified in the absence of any adequate alternative indicator.

Finally, it is also worth raising a third important point. No single indicator can conceivably measure and report all relevant aspects of sustainability. We remain clear that the Ecological Footprint answers a single, well defined question relating to the magnitude of resource use and resource availability. This provides a minimum requirement of sustainability, and other indicators are needed to address issues the Ecological Footprint cannot address (such as toxic pollution or social sustainability). This can be seen in the Ecological Footprint Standards. That the Footprint cannot supply all information for policy development relating to sustainable consumption/production, should not be considered a fault of the indicator, but indication that it should be used in tandem with other complementary indicators.

In conclusion, Global Footprint Network appreciates DEFRA's goal of implementing sustainable resource consumption in the UK and seeking useful indicators for policy to that effect. While we agree with the report's conclusion that the Ecological Footprint alone will not be able to guide this shift in national policy, we contend that it is an essential indicator to be used in conjunction with other complementary measures of sustainable consumption for the UK. Furthermore, the absence of alternative indicators for addressing ecological limits suggests that addressing concerns about the data limitations of the Ecological Footprint data, and its application to UK policy change, should be of the highest priority for DEFRA. To this end, Global Footprint Network would be delighted to work with DEFRA on a research collaboration to improve the Ecological Footprint data for the UK and create sound policy applications. We believe that the Ecological Footprint can make a vital contribution to informing policy change and help us all learn to live well *and* within the means of our one planet Earth.

If the reader would like more detailed commentary on any elements in the DEFRA report or the below response summary, please contact us at [info@footprintnetwork.org](mailto:info@footprintnetwork.org).