

# We're No. 28!

Behind Slovakia and Colombia but ahead of Slovenia

**W**ith our vaunted national park system and legislative protections like the Clean Air, Clean Water, and Endangered Species Acts, it's tempting to assume that the United States must be a world leader when it comes to the environment. But we're not even close.

A recent study comparing the environmental health of 133 nations ranks the United States 28th in the world, trailing Chile, Colombia, Japan, Malaysia, Slovakia, and Taiwan, as well as most of Western Europe. The winner for best environmental performance by a sovereign nation is—drum roll, please—New Zealand, followed by Sweden, Finland, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, and Austria.

Compiled by researchers at Columbia and Yale Universities, the Environmental Performance Index measures how well nations are doing in areas such as air, water, energy, biodiversity, and habitat. The study's authors also compare each nation with its geographic and economic peers. When clustered with 29 financially similar countries, the United States landed close to the bottom, at number 23.

We may be one of the wealthiest and most powerful countries on earth, but success takes more than that. "Good governance emerges as a critical factor in environmental performance," explains Daniel C. Esty, lead author of the report and director of the Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy.

The United States gets good grades for water quality and the pace of its timber harvests but poor marks in areas such as ozone emissions (scoring 0.1 out of a possible 100) and renewable-energy production (with a score of 4). "The lagging performance of the U.S. on environmental issues, particularly on energy and climate change, signals trouble not only for the American people but for the whole world," says James "Gus" Speth, dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies.

—Dashka Slater

## WWatch

### KEEPING TABS ON WASHINGTON

▶ **DUST STORM** In a move that air-pollution-control officials around the nation describe as "outrageous" and "unprecedented," the EPA has proposed exempting rural areas from federal clean-air regulations, maintaining that breathing dust from agricultural and mining operations is perfectly healthy. This contention is disputed by both the EPA's own Clean Air Scientific Advisory Committee, which wants the agency to continue monitoring particulate levels in rural regions, and studies showing that inhaling such dust can cause asthma, heart disease, and other illnesses.

▶ **FRANKENFIELDS** A two-year audit by the Department of Agriculture's investigative office lambasted the agency for failing to adequately monitor test plots of genetically engineered crops. The report found that



investigators charged with keeping tabs on biotech experiments didn't inspect planting sites or ensure that the crops were destroyed when the tests were over. In some cases, investigators didn't know the location of the plots they were supposed to be monitoring. The report warned that lax oversight could result in experimental crops spreading "before they are deemed safe to grow without regulation." —D.S.

## BIG AND BAD

▼ Sure, the United States is a conspicuous contributor of greenhouse-gas emissions, but that comes with the territory when you're one of the richest countries on the planet, right? Not necessarily. Citizens of many other nations live quite comfortably, thank you, and do so without mortgaging the health of future generations. Below, we chart the per-capita gross domestic product of the world's ten wealthiest countries and their per-capita carbon dioxide emissions.

Per-capita GDP (in thousands of U.S. dollars) in 2004

Per-capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (in metric tons) in 2002

