We're a little late on this, but early last month the United Nations issued its 2011 Millenium Development Goals report, which really should be at the top of the environmental community's focus. Usually, the MDGs are thought of simply as concerning poverty and development, but of course these issues deeply concern the environment. More directly, although not often highlighted, the seventh MDG is "environmental sustainability." There's actually some good news here, particularly on water access, ozone depletion, and even in forests, although progress is mixed. In some areas — particularly sanitation and species extinction — it's quite depressing. It's not a long report — just about 50 pages — and it really sets (or *should* set) the international agenda for much of the environmental community over the next few years.

Some notable findings:

FORESTS

"Forests are disappearing rapidly in South America and Africa, while Asia — led by China — registers net gains. " Is this glass half-full or half-empty? The report notes that we are still losing 5.8 million hectares of forest per year, but that that figure is a decline from previous reports. Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect an immediate turnaround: if we are just reducing the bleeding, then that si something. But that's a hell of a lot of forest.

OZONE DEPLETION AND CLIMATE CHANGE.

The report is very positive on this score, although perhaps it is spinning:

> As of end-2009, the consumption of 98 per cent of all ozone-depleting substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol had been phased out. Global observations have verified that atmospheric concentrations of such substances are declining. With full implementation of the Protocol's provisions, the ozone layer is expected to return to its pre-1980 levels around the middle of this century.
>
> The Protocol has also delivered substantial climate benefits, since ozone-depleting substances are also global-warming gases. The reduction in such substances between 1990, when they reached peak levels, and 2000 has yielded a net reduction of about 25 billion tonnes equivalent of CO2-

> weighted global warming gases.

I'm a touch skeptical on this, because Hydrochlrofluorocarbons, which were the replacement for ozone-depleting CFC (chlorofluorocarbons), can also be greenhouse gases. Besides, what does it mean to phase out "98%" of ozone-depleting substances? Is that a total number, or merely a percentage of products. If you get rid of 98% of the products, but are using a whole lot of the last 2%, then that might not be much progress.

DRINKING WATER

Here, the news is good unless you live in North Africa or the Middle East (which the report diplomatically refers to as "western Asia"):

> Most regions withdraw less than 25 per cent of their renewable water resources. Considering usage trends since 1960, they will not approach the range of physical water scarcity for some time. Two regions, however, Western Asia and Northern Africa, have farexceeded the threshold of 75 per cent, meaning that their water resources are no longer sustainable. Two other regions are approaching the threshold of 60 percent.

WATER AND SANITATION ACCESS:

On the water side, things are improving. The MDGs want to "halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation." On the positive side, "the world is likely to surpass the drinking water target, though more than 1 in 10 people may still be without access in 2015."

But on sanitation the situation is bleak:

The world is far from meeting the sanitation target. In fact, at the current rate of progress, it will take until 2049 to provide 77 per cent of the global population with flush toilets and other forms of improved sanitation. Almost half the population of developing regions and some 2.6 billion people globally were not using an improved form of sanitation in 2008.

Environmentalists, particularly developed country environmentalists, have not woken up to the sanitation crisis, but it is real and it is there.

Because this post is too long anyway, I have not mentioned the bleak report on the rate of species extinction as well. As they say, read the whole thing.