State of the World: A Year in Review

Compiled by Matt Richmond

This timeline covers some significant announcements and reports from October 2010 through November 2011. It is a mix of progress, setbacks, and missed steps around the world that are affecting environmental quality and social welfare.

Timeline events were selected to increase awareness of the connections between people and the environmental systems on which they depend.
CONSUMPTION
WWF report finds that humans currently use 1.5 Earths, suggesting the world would need 50 percent more ecological capacity for current consumption patterns to be sustainable.

ENDANGERED SPECIES
India declares the elephant a “National Heritage Animal” in order to increase protection of its 29,000 elephants.

MINING
In the Lima Declaration, Latin American indigenous tribes demand the end of large-scale mining in their territories.

CLIMATE
Scientists discover microbes capable of eating hydrocarbons and natural gas, with potential to “fix” greenhouse gases deep in the ocean’s crust.

HAZARDOUS WASTES
General Motors agrees to set up a $773 million trust to clean up properties left behind after its bankruptcy, two thirds of which are contaminated with hazardous waste.

GOVERNANCE
After 18 years of debate, 193 countries agree to a treaty defining how to cooperate in commercializing genetic resources.

CLIMATE
Overcoming a well-funded opposition campaign, Californians vote to keep the strongest greenhouse gas emissions standards in the United States.

NATURAL DISASTERS
A state of national catastrophe is declared in Colombia as intense rains affect at least 1.4 million people within the country’s borders, killing more than 160.
SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY

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ENERGY
New York becomes the first state to put a moratorium on hydraulic fracturing, a contentious form of natural gas drilling that can pose risks to drinking water supplies.

CLIMATE
Scientists find a “drastic” change in northern ocean currents that have a strong effect on weather and climate in the northern hemisphere.

TOXICS
Study finds that 99–100 percent of expectant mothers have multiple highly toxic chemicals in their bodies, including mercury, PCBs, and flame retardants.

NATURAL DISASTERS
Israeli firefighters finally gain control of the worst wildfire in the nation’s history, which burned over 10,000 acres and killed at least 42 people.

ENDANGERED SPECIES
The populations of four bumble-bee species in the US drop 96 percent, joining widespread losses in Europe and Asia of this important pollinator.

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CLIMATE
Japan announces that it will not support the extension of the Kyoto Protocol past 2012, no matter how much pressure it faces.

TOXICS
The Archuar of Peru win an appeal to bring suit against Occidental Petroleum Corp for 30 years of toxic wastewater dumping on their rainforested lands.

NATIONAL SECURITY
US Senate approves a new strategic nuclear arms treaty with Russia, which would restart inspections of both nations’ nuclear arsenals.

CLIMATE
NASA analysis finds 2010 ties 2005 as the warmest year on record.

CLIMATE
Australia cuts environmental programs in order to pay for massive flooding recovery, despite environmentalists’ claims that climate change is behind the flooding.
**FEBRUARY**

**HEALTH**
International Livestock Research Institute details the dangers of livestock diseases crossing over to humans in the developing world, where new diseases emerge every four months.

**BIODIVERSITY**
Svalbard Global Seed Vault celebrates its third anniversary, with over 600,000 seed samples as a genetic-resource backup in the event of disaster.

**NATURAL DISASTERS**
A magnitude 9.0 earthquake and 10-meter tsunami waves devastate Japan, and the Fukushima Daiichi power plant suffers the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl.

**TOXICS**
Some 40,000 scientists and clinicians urge US federal agencies to go beyond current standards in assessing the safety of chemicals.

**TRANSPORTATION**
The European Commission passes a long-term transport strategy that includes elimination of gas-powered cars in cities by 2050.

**FORESTS**
NASA mapping data shows over 1.3 million acres of the Amazon browned by record-breaking drought.

**CULTURE**
The Green Sports Alliance brings together teams in eight of the highest grossing US professional leagues to coordinate environmental initiatives.

**ECONOMY**
UN Environment Programme estimates that only 2 percent of world GDP is needed to transition the global economy toward sustainability.

**POLUTION**
In an unprecedented ruling, Indian courts allow individuals to sue Coca-Cola for restitution based on environmental damage caused by their bottling plants.

**POLUTION**

**HEALTH**

**ECONOMY**

**TOXICS**

**CULTURE**

**FORESTS**

**TRANSPORTATION**

**NATURAL DISASTERS**

**BIODIVERSITY**
HEALTH
Nearly half of US meat and poultry is found to be contaminated with Staph bacteria, with 50 percent of it resistant to at least three known antibiotics.

OZONE LAYER
Ozone loss over the Arctic reaches record levels, due to an especially cold winter in the stratosphere and the ozone-depleting substances still in the atmosphere.

ENERGY
Scientists at Los Alamos labs discover a cheap alternative to platinum in hydrogen fuel cells, a huge step toward reducing costs.

GOVERNANCE
Green Party wins its first seat in the Canadian House of Commons when its leader, Elizabeth May, is elected from British Columbia.

NATURAL RESOURCES
Through the Law of Mother Earth, Bolivia grants to all nature rights that are equal to humans.

CLIMATE
Prince of Wales warns that ignoring climate change gives rise to the potential for a crash far more severe than the recent financial collapse.

NATURAL RESOURCES
 Wikileaks cables expose a “cold peace” among Arctic nations, all vying for the potential riches lying beneath the melting Arctic ice.

CLIMATE
International Energy Agency finds that emissions of energy-related CO₂ in 2010 were the highest in history.

ENERGY
German government announces that it will replace all 17 nuclear power plants by 2022 with renewable energy sources.

SUSTAINABLE PROSPERITY.ORG
HEALTH
An EU law banning the sale of baby bottles containing Bisphenol A—a potential endocrine disruptor—goes into effect.

TOXICS
Newfoundland joins Quebec, Ontario, and New Brunswick in banning all cosmetic pesticides for residential lawns due to health and environmental concerns.

ENERGY
Google announces a $280-million solar fund to help homeowners buy solar panels for residential use.

BIODIVERSITY
Lake Niassa, one of the world's largest and most biologically diverse lakes, is approved as a reserve by the government of Mozambique.

ECONOMY
Economists with the Economics for Equity and the Environment Network find that each ton of CO₂ emitted causes up to $900 of environmental harm.

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NATURAL DISASTERS
Somalia and Eastern Africa see their worst drought in 60 years, as tens of thousands die of malnourishment and 10 million more need help to survive.

TOXICS
Experts warn that the sharp increase in autism is likely due in part to pregnant women, fetuses, and children being exposed to a cocktail of toxic chemicals.

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ENERGY
Philips, the consumer electronics giant, wins the $10-million L-Prize from US Energy Department for a 9.7-watt LED light bulb, the equivalent of a 60-watt incandescent.

ENERGY
Exxon Mobil wins access to drill in Arctic waters off the Russian coast that are newly opened to exploration for oil.

ENERGY
US National Center for Atmospheric Research finds that moving from coal to natural gas will actually increase the rate of global warming, calling into question this “bridge fuel.”

ENERGY
China begins allowing domestic solar power producers to sell their excess supply, hoping to build a domestic market for solar technologies.

ENERGY
The US Army launches an initiative to generate 2.1 million megawatt hours of electricity through renewable energy sources.

WATER
After months of protests and violence, the government of Myanmar cancels construction of a dam on the Irrawaddy, the country’s largest river.

BLE DIVERSITY
Research finds that three invasive species—the emerald ash borer, gypsy moth, and hemlock woolly adelgid—cause $3.5 billion of damage annually in the US.

NATURAL DISASTERS
US drought monitor reports that 73.5 percent of Texas is in “exceptional drought,” the most severe category possible.

 bloody adelgid

BLanco River, Texas

BLE DIVERSITY
Royal Dutch Shell manages to close a valve leaking oil into the North Sea, from which about 1,300 barrels had leaked in one week.

LED torture testing

DOE

ENERGY
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FOOD
International Food Policy Research Institute claims that US corn ethanol subsidies are a major cause of the year’s global food shortages.

MARINE ECOSYSTEMS
Infectious salmon anemia, a virus deadly for salmon that evolved in Atlantic fish farms, is found for the first time in the Pacific Ocean.

GOVERNANCE
US Bureau of Labor Statistics data show that only 0.3 percent of layoffs in 2010 were due to government regulations, despite reports of “job-killing” regulatory regimes.

CLIMATE
Two hundred eighty-five of the world’s largest investors urge governments to create a legally binding agreement on CO₂ emission reductions.

POPULATION
Celebration in the Philippines as Danica May Camacho is born—one of a number of children chosen by the UN to be the world’s symbolic 7 billionth inhabitant.

CLIMATE
The Durban climate negotiations open with South African President Jacob Zuma appealing to delegates to look beyond “national interests” for the good of humanity.

Biodiversity
An article in Nature Climate Change notes that global warming is shrinking not just the number but the actual size of many animal and plant species.

ENDANGERED SPECIES
Scientists warn that the Pacific yew tree, the main source of the chemotherapy drug Taxol, could soon be extinct due to overharvesting for medical purposes.

MARINE ECOSYSTEMS
Report on massive die-offs of oyster larvae in the northwest US provides a glimpse into future effects of ocean acidification on marine life.

See page 191 for sources.