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India Ranks 176th in Environmental Performance Index 2026 Amid Persistent Challenges in Environmental Governance and Sustainability

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Recent Developments:

- **Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy**, in collaboration with the **Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University**, released the **Environmental Performance Index (EPI) 2026**, ranking **India 176th out of 177 countries** with a score of **22.46**. **Estonia** secured the **1st rank**, while **Laos** ranked last.
- The report highlighted India's continued challenges in **air quality**, **biodiversity conservation**, **forest protection**, and **pollution management**, while recognising progress in **climate action**, **sanitation**, and **waste management**.
- The latest rankings have renewed debate regarding the **methodology**, **comparability across editions**, and the relevance of composite environmental indices for developing economies. The EPI itself notes that scores from different editions should not be directly compared because methodologies and datasets are periodically revised.

Environmental Performance Index (EPI):

About:

- The **Environmental Performance Index (EPI)** is a **biennial global environmental assessment** jointly developed by the **Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy** and the **Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN), Columbia University**.
- It provides a **data-driven evaluation** of how effectively countries protect **environmental health**, conserve **ecosystems**, and address **climate change** through measurable policy outcomes.
- The index enables governments to identify policy gaps, compare performance with peer countries, and strengthen evidence-based environmental governance.

Objectives:

- To assess national environmental performance using measurable indicators rather than policy intentions.
- To monitor progress towards internationally accepted environmental targets.
- To support policymakers in prioritising reforms for sustainable development.
- To encourage transparency, accountability, and international benchmarking in environmental governance.

EPI 2026 Framework:

- The **2026 EPI** evaluates **177 countries** using **47 indicators** grouped under **12 issue categories** and organised into **three policy objectives**—**Environmental Health**, **Ecosystem Vitality**, and **Climate Change**.
- Major assessment areas include **air quality**, **water resources**, **sanitation**, **climate mitigation**, **biodiversity**, **agriculture**, **fisheries**, **forest cover**, and **waste management**.

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Key Global Findings of EPI 2026:

Global Trends:

- **Estonia** emerged as the highest-performing country with a score of **74.79**, whereas **Laos** ranked last among the assessed countries.
- Countries possessing stronger environmental institutions, effective legislation, and higher administrative capacity generally performed better.
- Many countries have recorded gradual progress in **air pollution control** and **renewable energy deployment**, although global progress remains inadequate for achieving **net-zero emissions by 2050**.
- **Climate change, biodiversity loss, and air pollution** continue to remain the most significant global environmental challenges.

India's Performance in EPI 2026:

Overall Ranking:

- India ranked **176th out of 177 countries** with an overall score of **22.46**.
- India has remained among the **lowest-performing countries** in recent editions of the EPI, reflecting persistent environmental governance challenges.
- The EPI advises that rankings across different editions should not be interpreted as a continuous time series because methodologies, datasets, and indicators are revised periodically.

Key Observations:

- Rapid **urbanisation, industrialisation**, and increasing **energy demand** continue to exert pressure on environmental quality.
- India faces the complex challenge of balancing **economic growth, energy security, and environmental sustainability**.
- Environmental pressures remain particularly visible in **air pollution, ecosystem degradation, and greenhouse gas emissions**.

Areas Showing Improvement:

Climate Change:

- India demonstrated measurable improvement in **Climate Change** indicators, reflecting greater adoption of **renewable energy**, improvements in **energy efficiency**, and continued implementation of national climate policies.
- Expansion of **solar energy, wind energy**, and other non-fossil fuel capacity has strengthened India's climate mitigation efforts.

Waste Management and Sanitation:

- Improvements in **municipal solid waste management** and implementation of the **Swachh Bharat Mission** contributed positively to India's performance.
- Expansion of sanitation infrastructure and improved access to household toilets enhanced environmental health outcomes.

Major Areas of Concern:

Air Quality:

- India continues to perform poorly in **air quality**, despite initiatives such as the **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)**.
- Major pollution sources include **vehicular emissions, coal-based thermal power plants, industrial emissions, construction dust, crop residue burning, and biomass combustion**.

Biodiversity and Forests:

- **Habitat destruction, forest diversion, land-use change, ecosystem fragmentation**, and infrastructure expansion continue to threaten biodiversity conservation.
- Declining **tree cover quality** and increasing ecological fragmentation have adversely affected ecosystem resilience.

Fisheries and Agriculture:

- Unsustainable fishing practices and degradation of aquatic ecosystems have weakened fisheries sustainability indicators.
- Continued dependence on chemical-intensive agriculture and excessive pesticide application remains a significant environmental concern.

Urban Environmental Management:

- Inadequate **wastewater treatment**, weak **urban pollution control**, and increasing municipal waste generation continue to affect environmental quality in many urban centres.
- Rapid urban expansion has placed additional pressure on water resources, waste management systems, and urban ecosystems.

Constitutional and Legal Framework in India:

Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 48A** directs the State to protect and improve the environment and safeguard forests and wildlife.
- **Article 51A(g)** makes it a **Fundamental Duty** of every citizen to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife.

Judicial Contribution:

- The **Supreme Court of India** has expanded the scope of **Article 21** by recognising the **Right to a Clean Environment** as an integral component of the **Right to Life** through various landmark judgments.

Major Government Initiatives:

National Initiatives:

- **National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)** aims to reduce particulate air pollution across major cities.
- **National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)** provides the overarching policy framework for climate mitigation and adaptation.
- **Swachh Bharat Mission, Namami Gange Programme, Green India Mission, National Biodiversity Action Plan, Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA), Jal Jeevan Mission, Plastic Waste Management Rules with Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), and Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment)** collectively strengthen environmental governance.

Related International Frameworks:

Global Environmental Agreements:

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- **Paris Agreement (2015)** guides global climate action under the **United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)**.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** and the **Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (2022)** seek to halt biodiversity loss.
- **Ramsar Convention** promotes conservation and wise use of wetlands.
- **Montreal Protocol** and the **Kigali Amendment** address ozone layer protection and phased reduction of hydrofluorocarbons.
- The **United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, particularly **Goals 6, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15**, provide an integrated framework for environmental sustainability.

Challenges in Improving India's Environmental Performance:

Structural Challenges:

- Rapid urbanisation and industrial expansion continue to increase environmental pressures.
- Balancing poverty reduction, infrastructure development, and environmental conservation remains a significant policy challenge.
- Weak enforcement capacity, fragmented institutional coordination, and inadequate environmental monitoring reduce regulatory effectiveness.
- Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of floods, droughts, heatwaves, and ecosystem degradation.

Way Forward:

Policy Priorities:

- Strengthen environmental regulation through improved monitoring, transparent compliance mechanisms, and stricter enforcement.
- Accelerate the transition towards **renewable energy**, **energy efficiency**, and low-carbon economic development.
- Improve urban air quality through cleaner transport systems, industrial emission controls, and scientific dust management.
- Expand **wastewater treatment**, **circular economy practices**, and integrated solid waste management systems.
- Promote **sustainable agriculture**, reduce excessive chemical pesticide use, and encourage **natural farming**.
- Scale up **ecosystem restoration**, **afforestation**, **wetland conservation**, and **biodiversity protection**.
- Improve environmental data quality, public transparency, and evidence-based policy evaluation.
- Integrate environmental sustainability into infrastructure planning and long-term economic development strategies.

Conclusion:

- The **Environmental Performance Index** serves as an important global benchmarking tool for assessing environmental outcomes and governance effectiveness, although its methodology has also generated debate regarding cross-country comparability and periodic methodological revisions.
- For India, the findings underline the need to strengthen environmental institutions, improve implementation of existing policies, and integrate ecological sustainability with inclusive economic development.
- Sustained investments in clean energy, pollution control, ecosystem restoration, and scientific environmental governance will be essential for achieving long-term sustainable development.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Facts:

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- **Publisher:** Yale Center for Environmental Law & Policy and CIESIN, Columbia University.
- **Frequency:** Biennial.
- **EPI 2026 Coverage:** 177 countries, 47 indicators, 12 issue categories, and 3 policy objectives.

UPSC Prelims Facts:

- **Article 48A** belongs to the **Directive Principles of State Policy**.
- **Article 51A(g)** forms part of the **Fundamental Duties**.
- **Mission LiFE** promotes environmentally sustainable lifestyles through behavioural change.
- **CAMPA** finances compensatory afforestation and forest conservation activities.

UPSC Mains Enrichment:

"Sustainable development requires environmental governance that combines scientific monitoring, effective regulation, institutional accountability, and inclusive economic growth without compromising ecological resilience."