

# The Environment: Getting Better All the Time



By Alex Berezow, PhD — July 23, 2019



Credit: Hansueli Krapf/Wikipedia [1]

In 1967, the Beatles released *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, one of the best albums ever made. One of its hit songs was titled "Getting Better," and part of the chorus goes like this:

*I've got to admit it's getting better  
A little better all the time*

The song was about life in general, but it could have been dedicated to the environment. Contrary to what you see reported in the news, the environment is, bit by bit, getting better.

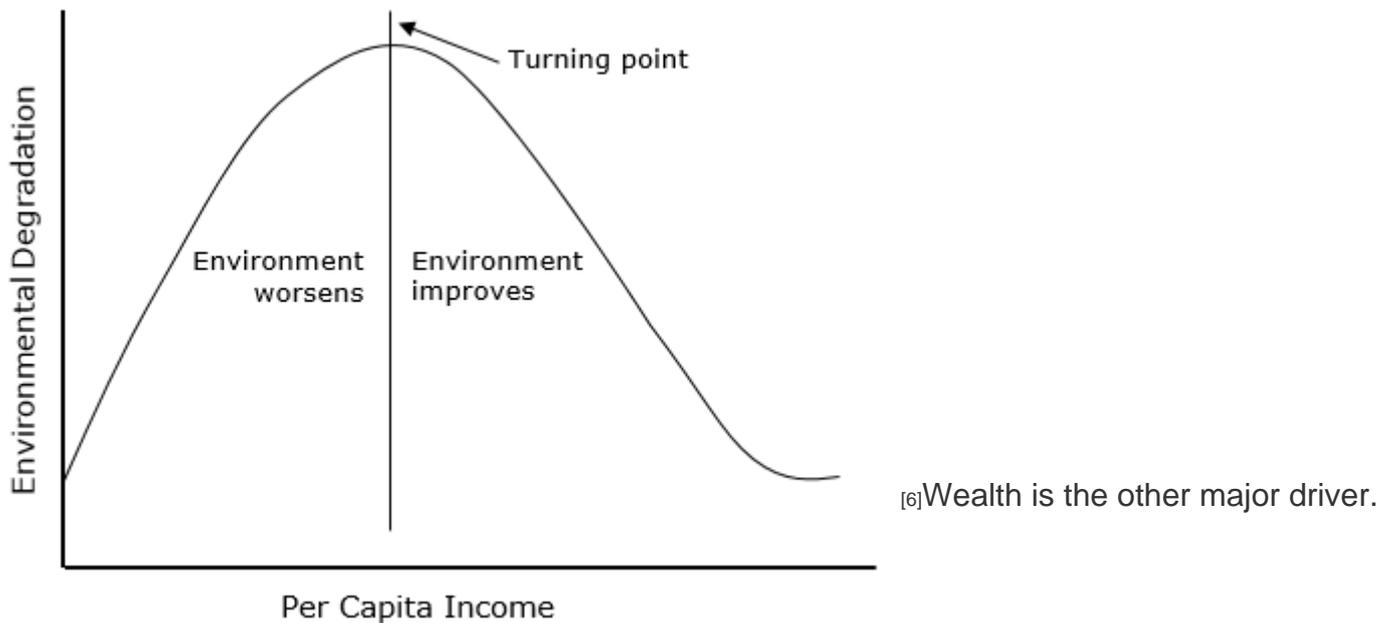
## The Environment: Getting Better All the Time

The latest evidence for this comes from France, which is becoming heavily re-forested. According to [The Economist](#) [2]:

*Since 1990, thanks to better protection as well as to a decline in farming, France's overall wooded or forested areas have increased by nearly 7%. And France is far from being alone. Across the EU, between 1990 and 2015, the total forested and wooded area grew by 90,000 square kilometres—an area roughly the size of Portugal. Almost every country has seen its forests grow over the period.*

Believe it or not, Europe is not an outlier. The [United States has more trees now than it did 100 years ago](#) [3]. A study in [Nature](#) [4] concluded that there is more tree cover on Earth now than 35 years ago<sup>1</sup>.

Why? Because of technology and wealth. Technology, including agricultural technology, helps decouple the economy from natural resources. In other words, we humans are becoming less reliant on Mother Nature for our well-being. We can grow more food on less land, for instance. Soon, using hydroponics, we may be able to [grow food in skyscrapers](#) [5].



When a poor country becomes wealthier, it usually does so at the *expense* of the environment. (That's why China is belching out pollution and Brazil is destroying the Amazon rain forest.) The primary concern of these countries is to escape poverty. But as countries become even richer, they decide to use some of that wealth to *benefit* the environment. Green spaces and parks are often seen as a luxury that only the wealthy can afford.

This concept is neither new nor a myth propagated by industry. It's known as the environmental Kuznets curve. ([Source](#) [6]: Govinddelhi via Wikipedia.) A textbook co-authored by Paul Krugman (yes, *that* [Paul Krugman](#) [7]) called *International Economics: Theory and Policy* said that the relevance of the environmental Kuznets curve "has been confirmed by a great deal of further research."<sup>2</sup>

None of this is meant to suggest that there are no environmental problems. Poor regions really are doing some very bad things to the planet. [Asia and Africa](#) [8], for example, are primarily responsible for dumping plastic into the ocean<sup>3</sup>.

As is often the case, the cure is wealth. If we want these countries to treat the planet well, we should do whatever we can to help make them richer. Incidentally, [they'll also have fewer kids](#) [9].

## Notes

(1) Naysayers, pessimists, and Debbie Downers will note that [biodiversity is lower in new forests](#) [10] than in old-growth forests. That's probably true but have patience. Biodiversity will return. The Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea has become a [haven for wildlife](#) [11], including endangered species.

(2) I once had a [TV debate](#) [12] with Prof. Corey Bradshaw of Flinders University, who erroneously claimed (at 26:26) that, "There is no evidence for the environmental Kuznets curve ever in the

history of humankind." Perhaps he should read more.

(3) Before anyone says that the United States and other rich countries are ultimately responsible because we outsource our pollution, note that in regard to "pollution havens," the aforementioned textbook says, "[T]here is not much evidence that 'dirty' industries move to countries with lax environmental regulation."

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**Links**

[1] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest#/media/File:Swiss\\_National\\_Park\\_131.JPG](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forest#/media/File:Swiss_National_Park_131.JPG)

[2] <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/07/18/why-frances-forests-are-getting-bigger>

[3] <https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/wilderness-resources/stories/more-trees-than-there-were-100-years-ago-its-true>

[4] <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-018-0411-9>

[5] <https://futurism.com/move-over-skyscrapers-plantscraper-5000-year>

[6] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuznets\\_curve#/media/File:Environmental\\_Kuznets\\_Curve.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuznets_curve#/media/File:Environmental_Kuznets_Curve.png)

[7] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2016/12/18/paul-krugman-now-has-nobel-disease-10609>

[8] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/07/26/asia-africa-cause-90-plastic-pollution-worlds-oceans-13233>

[9] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/06/20/earth-paul-ehrlich-un-revises-population-projection-downward-14108>

[10] <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/08/planet-earth-has-more-trees-than-it-did-35-years-ago/>

[11] <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/wildlife-thrives-dmz-korea-risk-location-180967842/>

[12] <https://youtu.be/DzcQerU4reM>