

A carbon-lite life is a happier life, says economic think-tank

By Jonathan Brown

The idea that money can't buy happiness has long appealed to those who get their kicks from the simpler things in life. Now it seems that having a large carbon footprint is no passport to contentment either.

Despite living in an age of ever more energy-intensive consumer goods, bigger cars, imported exotic food and cheaper foreign travel, people are barely more contented than they were 40 years ago.

These are the findings of a new report, The (un)Happy Planet Index published today by the new economics foundation.

Researchers from the think-tank analysed relative levels of carbon use in 30 European countries in relation to the physical and emotional well-being of their citizens since the 1960s.

In what will make depressing reading for the Government, Britain ranked 21st in the league table behind Scandinavia, most of Western Europe and even Poland and Romania. Iceland, Sweden and Norway occupied

the top three positions, with Estonia at the bottom of the table.

The reports authors claim the findings undermine fears that reducing carbon emissions in the battle against global warming will destroy hard-won gains in the developed world's quality of life since the Second World War.

The report concludes that: "While Europe's [carbon] footprint has grown dramatically since the 1960s, levels of well-being have increased only at the margins. In some countries, subjective life-satisfaction even appears to have declined."

In Britain for example, the per capita carbon footprint has increased by 50 per cent since 1961 making it the fourth biggest polluter in the sample. However, levels of average life satisfaction based on how people rated their own happiness, had fallen by about 6 per cent, sending the UK sliding down the rankings.

The report acknowledges that the rapid technological advances of recent decades have transformed the economic and social landscape in the developed world. These have seen overall life expectancy rise alongside a "real,

tangible improvement to material standards of living," it said.

However, the report adds: "The material standard of living in much of Europe was already very good indeed in the 1960s by comparison with the rest of the world. Such gains as have been made represent the 'icing on the cake' rather than the fundamental increases in welfare and have come at an unsustainably high environmental price."

Scandinavia, with its high levels of state investment in health and education and strong environmental policies, perhaps unsurprisingly dominated the top positions. But it was the countries' move away from dependence on fossil fuels that secured their status as carbon-lite, contented idylls, the report said.

In Iceland, for example, geothermal energy from its 200 volcanoes, 600 hot springs and major hydropower schemes, massively shrank the nation's per capita carbon footprint.

At the bottom of the table, people in Bulgaria reported the lowest level of life satisfaction, along with meagre GDP per head

and a carbon-hungry energy sector: Estonia, one of the emerging Baltic economies, suffered high levels of inequality, high crime and a woefully inefficient energy sector, due to its reliance on oil shale, sealing its fate at the bottom, it was claimed.

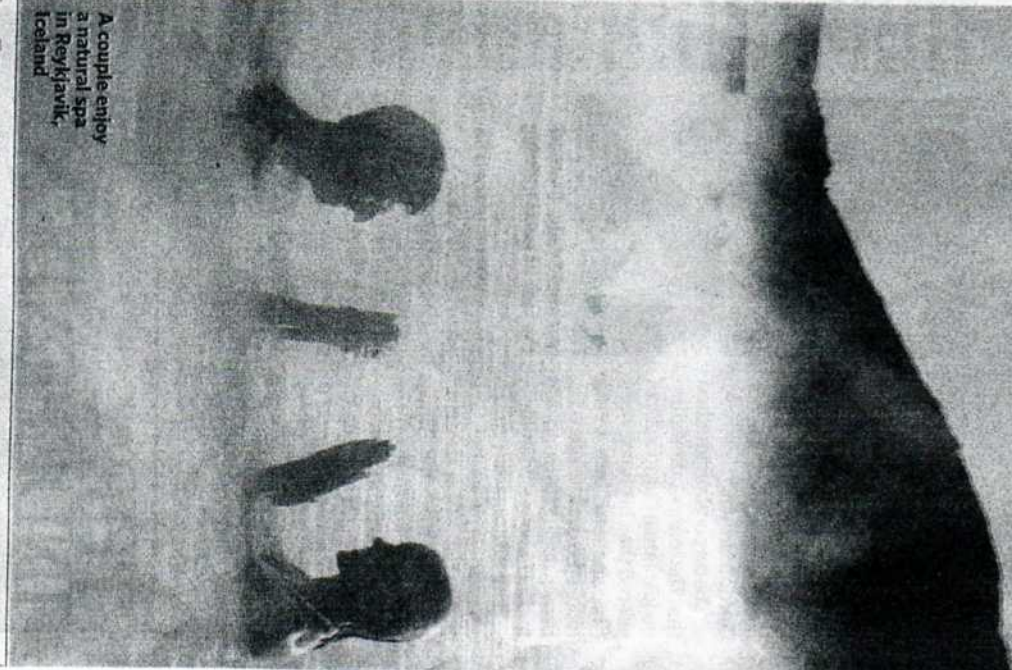
The report called for a three-pronged attack to make Europe deliver a better, carbon efficient, quality of life.

Governments should set legally binding targets for carbon reduction in each country to meet the EU's aim of limiting global temperature rises to below 2C above pre-industrial level. Policymakers should also work to reverse growing inequality in income, education, health and social opportunity. And employers must be encouraged to promote flexible working and allow staff to develop full lives outside the workplace, the study urged.

It concluded: "Rather than turn the clock back, we need to look to a post-consumption era that is aware of the false promise of materialism and utilises wealth and technology to deliver more efficiency, rather than just more."

The European Happy Planet Index

Low carbon footprint propels Scandinavia to the top



A couple enjoy a natural spa in Reykjavik, Iceland

