

# Ecological footprint of the ACT

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An ecological footprint is the quantity of global land and water needed to supply the resources — that is, the food, shelter, energy, goods, services and other needs — consumed by an individual or group of people, and to absorb their wastes and emissions.

A 'footprint' includes many hidden resources: for example, the land that grew the food we eat, or that produced the metals and wood in objects we use; the energy for harvesting and for trucking materials and goods to their point of use; as well as the resources involved in building the harvester and truck. Services such as banking are also part of an ecological footprint.

Knowing the size of our 'footprint' helps us understand if the sustainability of our lifestyles is improving or not. Ecological footprints calculated for the ACT grew from 8.5 global hectares (gha) per head in 2003–04 to 9.2 gha per head in 2008–09.

## Some key facts

Australia has some of the highest per-capita footprints in the developed world. For all ACT residents, the total ecological footprint was estimated at about 3.2 million gha in 2008–09, nearly 14 times the geographical area of the ACT. It was 13% above the Australian average and nearly 3.5 times the global average. The ACT's population is increasing at one of the fastest rates in Australia, so our total environmental impact is also growing.

To calculate ecological footprints, macro-economists analyse monetary transactions among industries, via detailed datasets that are regularly collected by government statisticians around the world. The ACT footprint is based on residents' expenditure on 300 commodities. Two-thirds of our environmental impact comes from just 25 of those commodities.

Our use of electricity contributes the largest ecological impact per person (12% in 2008–09), because most of our electricity comes from coal-fired power stations. However, on average we used less electricity per person in 2008–09 than in 2004.

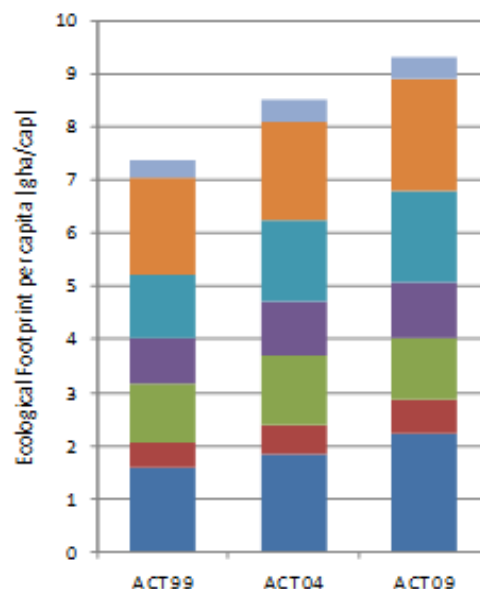
New houses contributed 6% of our individual footprints in 2008–09, because of their need for new timber and the amounts of energy used during the building phase. The retail trade, and eating out, each contributed 5–6% of our individual footprints in 2004 and 2009, largely because of the transport involved.

Among the 25 commodities that have the greatest impact on our ecological footprint are electronic equipment (2%), education (2%), and pharmaceuticals and sport (1% each).



The energy that lights up our shopping centres at night contributes to the ecological footprint of the ACT.

Photo: ACT Government.



The equivalent global hectares (gha) calculated as needed for supplying an average ACT individual's lifestyle in 1999, 2004 and 2009: food (■), shelter (■), energy use (■), mobility (■), goods (■), services (■), and 'other' (■).



Office of the Commissioner for  
Sustainability and the Environment

For further information see the 2011 ACT State of the Environment Report at [www.envcomm.act.gov.au](http://www.envcomm.act.gov.au). Of particular relevance are the papers called 'Driving Forces' and '2008–09 ACT Ecological Footprint'.

## Points to consider

Over the ten years from 1999 to 2009, the percentage of energy as part of our footprint has decreased, and the largest contributions to the footprint have been from food and services.

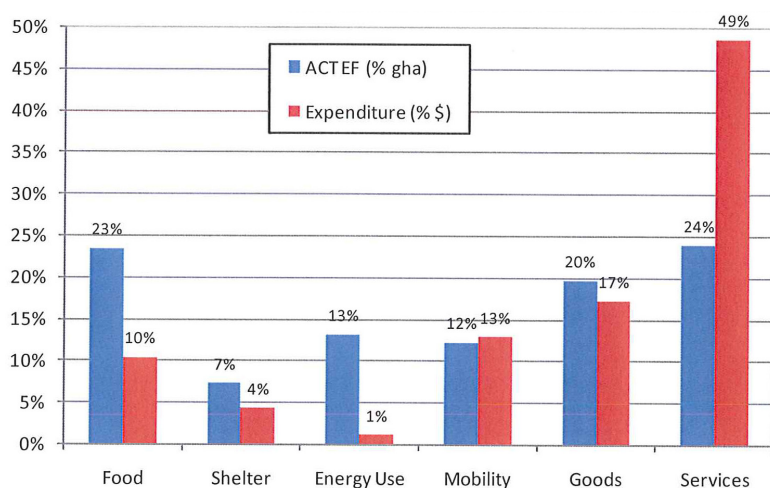
Canberrans are on average the most affluent people in Australia with relatively high disposable incomes that we use to drive or fly interstate, and to buy

luxury goods and services. Most goods for sale here need to be transported into the ACT because the Territory has only limited local manufacturing and industry.

Therefore, the impacts of our consumption patterns and large ecological footprint are mainly felt elsewhere.

Food and timber used here is mostly grown in other parts of Australia or the world, and the

production practices used there may or may not be sustainable, environmentally or socially. For example, goods we buy here may be produced using unhealthy working conditions and poorly regulated environmental pollution practices. This means that our habits here in the ACT have a role in global impacts such as increased global greenhouse gas emissions and depletion of global biodiversity.



The diagram shows the percentages of ACT's total ecological footprint (blue) and expenditure (red) in 2008–09 on various types of goods.

If everyone in the world lived the way an average ACT resident does, we would need five Earths to give us enough land and surface water to provide our resources and absorb our wastes.

## Being alert, acting sustainably

With so many components making up the ACT's ecological footprint, combined with our situation as users rather than producers of many everyday commodities, it will be complex and challenging to reduce our ecological impact. Efforts will often require balancing

competing priorities and making trade-offs.

As individuals we can make deliberate changes to our consumption by finding information about production and supply chains of products. Then perhaps we can aim to purchase

goods and services from lower footprint sources and categories.

By consciously changing consumption patterns, ACT residents not only reduce their own footprints but also start to reduce the ecological footprint of Australia.

