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World Vehicle Population Tops 1 Billion Units

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The number of vehicles in operation worldwide surpassed the 1 billion-unit mark in 2010 for the first time ever.

Analysis

According to *Ward's* research, which looked at government-reported registrations and historical vehicle-population trends, global registrations jumped from 980 million units in 2009 to 1.015 billion in 2010.

The figures reflect the approximate number of cars, light-, medium- and heavy-duty trucks and buses registered worldwide, but that does not include off-road, heavy-duty vehicles.

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The 3.6% rise in vehicle population was the largest percentage increase since 2000, while the 35.6 million year-to-year unit increase was the second-biggest increase in overall volume ever.

The market explosion in China played a major role in overall vehicle population growth in 2010, with registrations jumping 27.5%. Total vehicles in operation in the country climbed by more than 16.8 million units, to slightly more than 78 million, accounting for nearly half the year's global increase.

The leap in registrations gave China the world's second-largest vehicle population, pushing it ahead of Japan, with 73.9 million units, for the first time.

India's vehicle population underwent the second-largest growth rate, up 8.9% to 20.8 million units, compared with 19.1 million in 2009.

Brazil experienced the second largest volume increase after China, with 2.5 million additional vehicle registrations in 2010.

U.S. registrations grew less than 1% last year, but the country's 239.8 million units continued to constitute the largest vehicle population in the world.

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Vehicles in operation in 2010 equated roughly to a ratio of 1:6.75 vehicles to people among a world population of 6.9 billion, compared with 1:6.63 in 2009. But the distribution was not equal, even among the biggest markets.

In the U.S., the ratio was 1:1.3 among a population of almost 310 million — the highest vehicle-

to-person ratio in the world. Italy was second with 1:1.45. France, Japan, and the U.K. followed, all of which fell in the 1:1.7 range.

In China, the ratio was 1:17.2 among the country's more than 1.3 billion people. India, the world's second most-populous nation with 1.17 billion people, saw a ratio of 1:56.3.

The world vehicle population in 2010 passed the 1 billion-unit mark 24 years after reaching 500 million in 1986. Prior to that, the vehicle population doubled roughly every 10 years from 1950 to 1970, when it first reached the 250 million-unit threshold.



China vehicle registrations jumped 27.5% last year, more than any other country.

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New Report: There Are Now 1 Billion Cars on the Road

A year ago yesterday an unfortunate line of drivers in China spent their ninth straight day stuck in traffic. If the country keeps adding cars to its roads the way it did in 2010, that type of congestion might seem light.

According to the auto industry researcher Ward's, the global car population topped the 1 billion mark in 2010 — with a 27.5 percent surge in vehicle registration in China leading the way. China added nearly 17 million cars last year, reports Ward's; it now has roughly 78 million in all and has passed Japan for the world's No. 2 car population. China accounted for nearly half of the entire global increase of 35.6 million vehicles — the second-largest annual spike in volume ever recorded, says Ward's.

China was far from the only country to fill its roads. India experienced the second-highest percentile growth, 8.9 percent, pushing the country past 20 million cars in operation. Brazil added 2.5 million vehicles, second most to China in volume. While registration in the United States didn't even rise a full percentage point, America's car total still far outpaces the pack, with a vehicle population near 240 million — good for an ownership ratio of one car for every 1.3 Americans.

The global car population only stands to grow. U.S. cities may be reaching peak car capacity, but that's certainly not the case in China. In discussing the Ward's figures, Stephen Lacey at Climate Progress cites a report from the International Transport Forum that estimates a global vehicle fleet of 2.5 billion come 2050. Unless you're Rick Perry, it's not hard to see how damaging such a world would be to the environment.

For starters, the Washington Post points out, a global car population of 2.5 billion would mean a massive increase in oil production — much of it unconventional oil that's "significantly dirtier, from a CO2 perspective, than the traditional stuff":

Daniel Sperling, a professor at UC Davis's Institute of Transportation Studies, put out a useful presentation last year running through what that two billion cars would mean. Take energy: Right now, the world produces about 87 million barrels of oil per day, and most of that comes from conventional sources. A world with two billion—or more—cars will likely require boosting that to 120 million barrels per day or beyond, Sperling argues. And, given that production from conventional wells is expected to flatten in the coming decades, getting to that level will mean relying on unconventional sources like the tar sands in Alberta.

Of course these estimates might be tempered by a boost in electric and hybrid models. America's fuel-efficiency standard will rise to 54.5 miles per gallon by 2025. China has made a push for cleaner cars as well — but so far that effort is "lagging," reports Jonathan Watts of the Guardian's Environment Blog. For instance, says Watts, you can count the number of Priuses sold in China last year on one finger:

It had been hoped that generous government subsidies and policy support would help domestic manufacturers like BYD to leapfrog better established overseas rivals by mass producing electric cars.

But BYD have scaled back their ambitions after failing to find a market due to cost and technical concerns. ...

In a report earlier this week, IHS Automotive, a Shanghai-based consultancy, said the sales increase for such vehicles is far behind the government's timeframe. It noted too the poor performance of the Prius, which notched up a sole sale in a year when 13.8m new passenger cars were registered in China. Among them were 850,000 SUVs, a rise of 24%.

The gas guzzlers versus plug-ins argument might be beside the point. Another billion cars on the world's roads will crush the environment just based on emissions from auto production and infrastructure construction, Toyota's Bill Reinert explained in a New York Times Magazine article from 2007:

Right now, Reinert says, there are about three-quarters of a billion cars worldwide; by 2050, if market trends continue, "we could conceivably have 2 billion or even 2.5 billion cars." Accommodating those cars will entail building new roads and new factories and spending vast amounts of energy to make shipments. All those activities will create enormous emissions on their own. So even with giant strides in clean-vehicle technology, just doubling the number of vehicles could increase the overall environmental effect by a factor of three.

To say nothing of the impact on traffic