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A Planet For Some Carbon?

by Daphne Wysham

Last week in Montreal, climate negotiators met to determine how the majority of the world's countries will move forward when the Kyoto Protocol expires in 2012. While melting ice caps and alarming shifts in ocean currents flashed across the headlines, little progress was made.

The sad truth is that the world's atmosphere will continue to warm. It may warm past the "tipping point," the point of no return at which feedback loops build upon one another, and exponential increases in carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases such as methane bring catastrophically altered weather patterns with devastating consequences, especially for the poorest.

Despite the terrifying notion of a looming point of no return, the U.S. government was not a party to these negotiations, having withdrawn from the Kyoto Protocol early in George W. Bush's first term.

It was a bit puzzling why Bush wasn't a party. He would have felt right at home in the Palais de Congress, where the 11th Conference of the Parties (COP-11) to the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change met: It felt more like a business convention than an environmental one. Everywhere one turned, people were striding purposefully toward another side event or delegates' meeting focused on the topic of buying and selling the latest hot commodity: carbon.

Almost everyone, from the environmentalists to government representatives to the overwhelming majority of business groups, was talking in the new, mysterious lexicon of "carbon trading."

Tom Goldtooth, a Diné and Mdewakanton Dakota and director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, said: "When I try to explain carbon trading to our elders, they tell me, 'Tom, if you can't make sense of it in our Native language, then there is something wrong with it.' "

This isn't just the case with Native languages. Like most people steeped in climate change issues, I have trouble explaining how carbon trading works, or doesn't, in simple English.

Even if there were some kind of decoder ring that could help the public and media decipher the discussions at meetings such as this, it might not make much difference. There's an even bigger problem: Reducing fossil fuel consumption, the best and simplest solution for climate change, isn't on the agenda.

Instead, self-professed experts on the "flexible mechanisms" of carbon trading -- or "mechs-perts" -- who talk with confidence about this entirely experimental market are running the show.

Many environmentalists doubt that carbon trading is the best way to slow or reverse global warming. But they fear that opposing this keystone of the Kyoto climate change treaty would be tantamount to endorsing the Bush administration position and so stay mum.

Instead, all are urged to unite behind a bizarre, incomprehensible and totally corruptible system of carbon trading if we are to save the planet from an ecosystemic meltdown.

Around the world, ancient cultures such as the Diné, the Inuit and the Tibetans have evolved a way of constructing homes, communities and businesses with a respect for nature's fine line between scarcity and abundance. This is how they have survived in harmony with icy and tropical environments for thousands of years.

This brilliance and understanding is being out-shouted at international climate negotiations by carbon traders who are tinkering over a time span of a few years with a system that, if it fails, threatens to undo millennia of social and biological evolution, much of it irreplaceable.

And yet environmentalists -- wittingly or, more likely, unwittingly, out of sheer intimidation or confusion -- are offering their complicity with this dangerous plan.

Carbon Trading

Carbon emissions trading involves the trading of permits to emit carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases, calculated in tons of carbon dioxide equivalent. It is one of the ways countries can meet their obligations under the Kyoto Protocol.

A country (or group of countries) caps its carbon emissions at a certain level -- say, 5 percent below 1990 levels by 2010 --and then issues permits to industries that grant the firm the right to emit a stated amount of carbon dioxide over a time period. This is known as "cap and trade." If carbon emissions targets are exceeded, then a country can buy the "right to pollute" beyond its quota from another country.

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