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FINDINGS

### Trusting Nature as the Climate Referee

By JOHN TIERNEY  
Published: December 14, 2009

Imagine there's no Copenhagen.



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Viktor Koen

Imagine a planet in which [global warming](#) was averted without the periodic need for thousands of people to fly around the world to promise to stop burning fossil fuels. Imagine no international conferences wrangling over the details of climate policy. Imagine entrusting the tough questions to a referee: Mother [Earth](#).

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That is the intriguing suggestion of Ross McKittrick, an economist at the University of Guelph in Ontario who, like me, is virtuously restricting his carbon footprint by staying away from Copenhagen this week. Dr. McKittrick expects this [climate conference](#) to yield the same results as previous ones: grand promises to cut carbon emissions that will be ignored once politicians return home to face voters who are skeptical that global warming is even a problem.

To end this political stalemate, Dr. McKittrick proposes calling each side's bluff. He suggests imposing financial penalties on carbon emissions that would be [set according to the temperature in the earth's atmosphere](#). The penalties could start off small enough to be politically palatable to skeptical voters.

If the skeptics are right and the earth isn't warming, then the penalties for burning carbon would stay small or maybe even disappear. But if the climate modelers and the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) are correct about the atmosphere heating up, then the penalties would quickly, and automatically, rise.

"Either way we get a sensible outcome," Dr. McKittrick argues. "The only people who lose will be those whose positions were disingenuous, such as opponents of greenhouse policy who claim to be skeptical while privately believing greenhouse warming is a crisis, or proponents of greenhouse gas emission cuts who neither understand nor believe the I.P.C.C. projections, but invoke them as a convenient argument on behalf of policies they want on other grounds even if global warming turns out to be untrue."

[Dr. McKittrick](#) is in the skeptical camp himself and has published critiques of the past warming trends reported at weather stations on the earth's surface (like the data now being re-examined after the much-publicized hacking of e-mail messages and files of

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