

Carbon Trading: A Planetary Gamble

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Montreal climate talks analysis

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This week in Montreal, climate negotiators will hammer out the terms under which most of the world's countries move forward on limiting greenhouse gas emissions after 2012, when the Kyoto Protocol expires. Or they won't. Regardless of their decisions, the world's atmosphere will continue to warm, perhaps past the so-called "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 like 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the terrifying notion of a looming point of no return, the U.S. government is not a party to these negotiations, having withdrawn from the Kyoto Protocol early in George W. Bush's first term. It's a bit puzzling why Bush isn't a party since he would feel right at home here in the Palais de Congress where the 11th Conference of the Parties (COP-11) to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is underway: It feels more like a business convention than an environmental one. Everywhere one turns, people are 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, is talking in the new, mysterious lexicon of "carbon trading."

As Tom Goldtooth, a Dine and Mdewakanton Dakota, and director of the Indigenous Environmental Network, puts it, "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 a lot of trouble explaining how carbon trading works, or doesn't, in simple English. For example, the concept of "additionality" is absolutely critical to the success or failure of carbon trading, but it's hugely challenging and largely subjective to define.

This jargon obscures the meaning of what's discussed at these conferences, as does the torrent of head-spinning acronyms like SBSTA, EUA, AAU, ERU, JI, and CERs.

Even if there were some kind of decoder ring that could help the public and media decipher the discussions at meetings like 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 so-called "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 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 an entirely bizarre, incomprehensible, and totally corruptible system of carbon trading if we are to save the planet from an ecosystemic meltdown. (Ironically, this trading system was the result of pressure on the international community from an earlier U.S. administration, but that's another story.)

Carbon trading's future looks at carbon as a commodity to be produced on the land of the poorest in developing countries or using their resources and then selling it to unseen buyers in richer countries, often without benefit or with actual harm to the poorest. Or, as Jack Cogen, president of Natsource, one of the biggest private buyers of carbon credits, put it in Montreal this week, "The carbon market doesn't care about sustainable development. All it cares about is the carbon price."

Around the world, ancient cultures such as the Dine, 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 the 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.

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