



Mark Carwardine's Wild Thoughts

It seemed like good news from the recent climate change conference in Montreal, but when you look closer, you find very little has been achieved.

Talk about hot air. Ministers were patting themselves on the back at the climate change conference in Montreal before Christmas, claiming to have made two major breakthroughs in their lackadaisical efforts to combat global warming.

The first was to have yet more talks. Words fail me. As if that wasn't bad enough, these talks will focus on adapting to the impact of climate change rather than actually solving it. The second was to extend the Kyoto Protocol beyond its 2012 deadline – despite its gross inadequacies and exasperating ineffectiveness. I suppose they have to show something for nearly two weeks of heated debate involving no fewer than 10,000 delegates from all over the world, but it clearly wasn't the resounding success we've been led to believe.

The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement setting targets for industrialised countries to cut their greenhouse gas emissions. Each country has its own specific target, and can trade its greenhouse gas allowance with other countries, but the overall aim is to cut their combined emissions to five per cent below 1990 levels by 2008-12.

But there is one little problem – it isn't working. For a start, their five per cent target barely scratches the surface. The Kyoto signatories account for barely one third of global greenhouse gas emissions and, according to the UN, they're well off target anyway. Many climate scientists argue that a 60 per cent cut across the board would be more realistic if we have any hope of avoiding the worst consequences of global warming.

One way of achieving this fairly would be to allocate every person on the planet an equal quota of greenhouse gas emissions. But that could never work because some countries believe they are more equal than others. The US, for instance, is responsible for about a quarter of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and yet hasn't even ratified the agreement. George Bush refuses to budge when anyone even attempts to talk about new commitments for reducing carbon dioxide emissions. This sad fact alone makes the whole exercise virtually obsolete.

India and China – potentially major polluters with huge populations and growing economies – have ratified, but do not have to limit their emissions. While the rest of the world is closing coal-fired power stations, they are going for broke, building 562 (China) and 213 (India) more over the next 25 years. China is on course to overtake the US as the world's biggest emitter of greenhouse gases and its emissions could soon dwarf any cuts in carbon dioxide that the rest of the world can make. What a mess.

I can understand why so many people support the Kyoto Protocol, despite its frustrations and flaws. There is no escaping the fact that a comprehensive, binding treaty, combined with appropriate new technology, is our only hope. At least Kyoto sets out a framework for negotiations. But what makes me so hot under the collar is that governments – and even some environmental groups – are pretending that significant progress is being made when, quite clearly, it isn't. More talks and extended deadlines are simply far too little, far too late.