

Science Matters

- by David Suzuki



Tough time at Climate Summit

Tough times at the climate summit

How do you convince some of the world's biggest polluters to quit stalling and do something about global warming?

That's the question facing many developing nations at this week's climate summit in The Hague, Netherlands. More than 170 countries are represented at the conference, which is supposed to come up with the rules for implementing the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, aimed at reducing the greenhouse gases that are causing global warming.

The developing nations will have their hands full, because countries like Canada, the United States and a few others have been pressing for "loopholes" that will give them credit for reducing emissions, but in fact will allow them to continue polluting. These loopholes include exporting nuclear power, buying pollution "credits" from countries that now pollute less because their economies have collapsed, and claiming to reduce carbon dioxide through "carbon sinks."

But developing countries have a powerful incentive. According to a new study released last week by the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research in Norwich, UK, some of the greatest impacts from temperature increases will be felt in many of the world's poorest nations - areas that already have some of the hottest and driest climates.

These nations, including Afghanistan and Tajikistan in Asia, and Tanzania and Sierra

Leone in Africa, already suffer from drought, so predicted temperature increases of more than five degrees Celsius could prove devastating. The study also considered wealth and various countries' financial ability to cope with the impact of warming. Again, poorer countries like Ethiopia are expected to be the hardest hit. In fact, the most threatened nations almost without exception produce the smallest amounts of greenhouse gases.

One exception, of course, is Canada. Canada is one of the highest per capita emitters of greenhouse gases and the Tyndall Centre study concurs with others that predict Canada's temperatures will rise by more than six degrees Celsius this century. Temperature increases of that magnitude over just one century are unprecedented and could severely damage many of Canada's ecosystems, according to a summer report from the World Wildlife Fund.

Some people argue that climate models like the one used by the Tyndall Centre are unreliable because they may not adequately assess variables like carbon sinks in helping to slow the warming trend. Carbon sinks are things like oceans and trees, which absorb carbon dioxide (an important greenhouse gas) from the atmosphere. Right now, these sinks absorb almost half of the world's annual emissions of carbon dioxide. And if trees and other plants grow faster because of the increased carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, in theory these sinks could absorb even

more carbon and possibly reduce the warming trend.

But another study published last week in the journal Nature shows that relying on carbon sinks is a very risky proposition. The study found that, as temperatures increase, plants absorb less carbon dioxide while micro organisms in the soil release more and more of it. So higher temperatures would actually increase carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and lead to even more warming.

That's why the Kyoto Protocol is important. It's a small, but critical step to reduce emissions. Yet Canada's reliance on nuclear power, sinks and emissions credits to meet the Protocol clearly fly in the face of its intent. These policies are not the path to a clean-energy future-one with reduced air pollution and a more stable climate. They are attempts to meet an international obligation through loopholes that will do little to actually reduce emissions.

As recent studies have shown, unless we curb emissions, global warming could devastate many developing countries and it will have a serious impact on Canada and other industrialized nations as well. The Kyoto Protocol is not a political game. Canada's politicians and negotiators at the climate summit need to recognize that and remember what brought them to the table in the first place.

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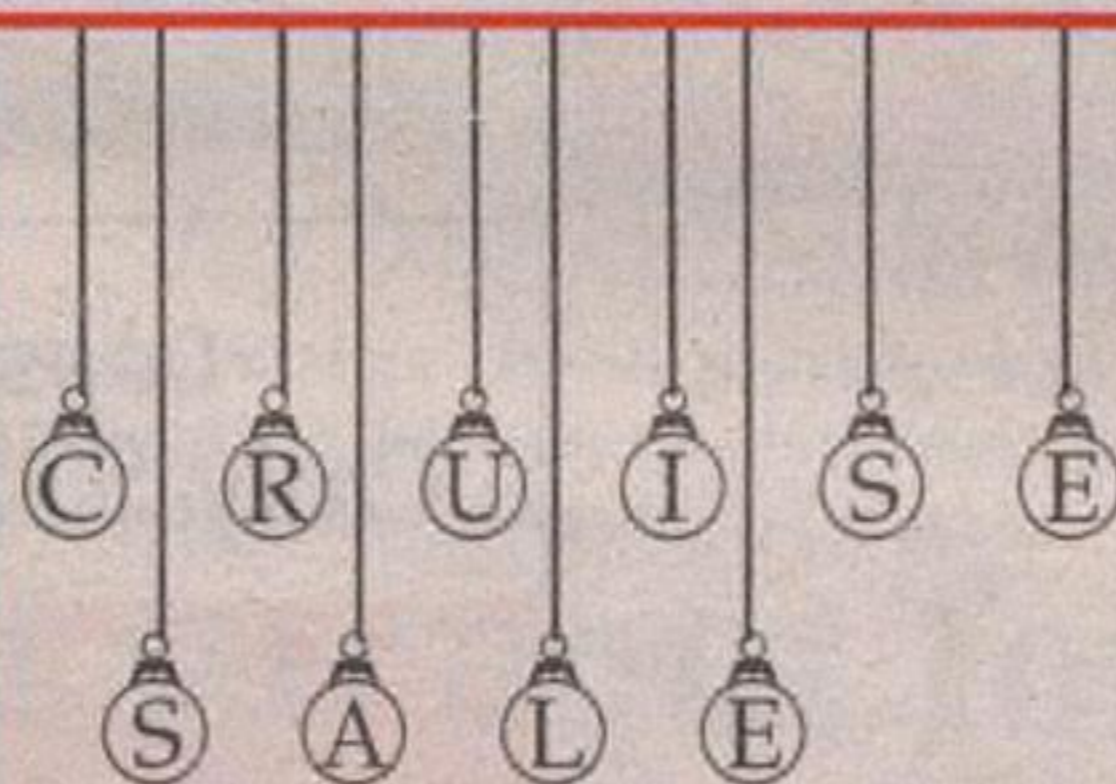


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