

Milan 1 - 0 Kyoto

11 Dec 2003



Can we hope that by cutting carbon emissions, the climate will revert to some previous set of conditions?

Milan recently hosted the Annual UN Review on Climate Change in December 2003. Delegates could not fail to have been concerned with two recent developments: firstly the reiteration by Russia that it will not yet ratify the Kyoto protocol and secondly, the floods in Southern France, caused by some of the heaviest rain for 30 years.

In Russia

The issue of Russia signing the Kyoto Protocol has been discussed in the Geography in the News article "Emissions Impossible?". In a controversial announcement, Andrei Illarionov said that "in its present form, this protocol cannot be ratified. It is impossible to undertake responsibilities that place

serious limits on the country's growth". This can be looked at in two ways:

- Russia would ratify Kyoto if changes are made;
- with elections to the Duma occurring earlier this week, the announcement was designed to placate fears that Russia's economic future would be put in jeopardy by signing.

For the first scenario, we will have to wait for further announcements and negotiations. The second however, could be seen as an example of putting political and economic gain before wider environmental and social considerations. This suggests that cuts in emissions and economic growth are not compatible, and that cuts are therefore not politically attractive to many countries.

This may not always be the case. The first press conference of the Milan talks was given by the USA, announcing that it is pursuing its own strategy of voluntary action and development of new energy technologies. This is an alternative to what it sees as the "Command and Control" strategy of Kyoto. In effect, it is attempting a "market orientated" approach to emissions control.

However, is there time for market led changes with no real timescale or set goals? The US failure to ratify the Kyoto Treaty, takes it a long way from getting the 55% of emissions production it needs to become effective. The adoption of an alternative strategy by the US means that two parallel plans are running side by side with similar goals (reduction of carbon) but different methods. Does conflict breed the best and quickest solution?

In France

Marseilles was declared last week after 15,000 people were evacuated from their homes, with at least five dead due to the flooding of the River Rhone. The flooding was made worse by 93mph winds battering the region. In the Gard region around Nimes, northwest of Marseilles, 250,000 people were warned not to drink tap water for fear of contamination. As the river subsided, army teams were in action shoring up dykes that had been leaking water onto farmland. Four 900 MW nuclear reactors were temporarily suspended having an impact on the provision of electricity in the region. The French deputy foreign minister, Renaud Muselier observed regarding the flood, "It seems clear the climate is changing"!

The link

It appears that politicians are beginning to recognize climate change and its potential impacts such as the Marseilles floods. The aim to cut emissions is necessary and most would argue should be encouraged but some argue that we also need to be working on how to live with the changing climate.

We cannot hope that by cutting carbon emissions, the climate will revert to some previous set of conditions. We can only slow further change and even this, some experts say, require more drastic measures than those set out at Kyoto. The evidence of a changing climate was highlighted not only by the French floods, but also by the release yesterday of the "Climate Change Observations and Predictions" report by the Hadley Centre of the Met Office. It revealed that over the past fifty years, the frequency of storms over the UK during the October – March period has increased. This could be related to a greater north-south pressure difference across the Atlantic; however, it admits that longer-term observations are needed. The existence of uncertainty has and continues to be an obstacle in tackling climate change, both in terms of motivation and knowing how to respond.

Last week an agreement was reached in Milan regarding the planting GM forests in developing countries to help absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This caused anger especially from the EU and environmentalists, fearing that this will threaten native species. If this is the case, solving one problem will have caused another. How do we rate the importance of various problems and allocate priority accordingly?

Impacts of climate change is getting ever more complicated; the solution of one problem can lead to new problems, while, at the same time the changing climate is posing new challenges that will need to be accepted and adapted to.