

Four key fallacies about global climate change

Rich Heffern | Sep. 30, 2009 NCR Today

In December nations will gather in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the United Nations Climate Conference. There they will strive to strike a global deal that will address the climate change crisis. According to Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, this momentous task will be easier if we can dispense with four common fallacies about solving the climate crisis.

1. *We need to set a high price on carbon.* According to Pope, a high price on carbon will mean failure as it makes the cost of doing something about the crisis appear to be completely out of reach. What is needed instead is a low price for alternatives to carbon. "That requires, in part, fixing flaws in the energy market. If you rent office space, for example, you have no control over the efficiency of the furnace or windows, but you still pay the bills. The landlord gets reimbursed for inefficiency and has no incentive to change.

"It will take capital to develop new technologies, modernize old infrastructures, and fix markets. A price on carbon would be a sensible, fair way to fund these investments. We should price carbon not to make it prohibitively expensive but to make avoiding carbon cheap and easy."

2. *It doesn't matter who owns the world's carbon sinks.* Carbon sinks are natural features that remove carbon dioxide from the air and store it. Mostly the countries that emit the greatest amount of carbon dioxide do not own the sinks that absorb it. U. S. drivers don't own the Pacific Ocean, nor does Exxon Mobil own the Amazon rainforest.

"Those who dump carbon need to pay those who absorb it. That would be straightforward enough in some cases: Argentina owns its pampas and Canada its boreal forests. But what of the larger sinks -- the ocean and atmosphere? The U. N. Law of the Sea treaty states that all humans have an equal share in the ocean; the same logic suggests we all own an equal share of the sky. A global tax-and-dividend system could see to it that those who pollute pay those who don't."

3. *Future climate negotiations should just build on Kyoto.* The problem with the Kyoto accord was not that it let China, Brazil and Mexico off the hook; it's that it let the developed world off the hook as well, according to Pope. "Rich countries told poor countries they didn't need to limit their greenhouse gases, in return for which the poor didn't press their claim for rent on their carbon sinks. Furthermore, the rich countries carbon dioxide reductions were measured not against what was needed but against the artificial 'baseline' of 1990, which merely locked in the historical inequity."

4. *The only important goal is keeping atmospheric carbon dioxide below 350 parts per million.* Carbon dioxide emissions are the big threat to the climate; however, right now much of the low-hanging fruit is something else.

"In the Arctic and Himlaya regions, soot is responsible for most of the warming to date. It comes from bunker oil and diesel fuel used in ships and trucks, from forest fires and household cooking, and from primitive coal-burning plants. Soot can be easily controlled and, as a bonus, it would greatly improve public health.

"Another non carbon dioxide greenhouse gas is methane, a key source of which is organic garbage decomposing in landfills. "Old-fashioned composting easily solves the problem. San Franciscans are now required to separate out food waste from their garbage, just as they do for glass and paper. It's not that hard."

"As we're learning, shifting our society away from fossil fuels is a series of complicated, fraught battles. We can win a big one in Copenhagen, but it will be easier if we go there unburdened by yesterday's fallacies."

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