

# Green Fatigue

by Stacy D. VanDeveer

Coming just after the end of the Cold War, the 1992 United Nations Summit on Environment and Development, in Rio de Janeiro, seemed to mark the beginning of a new era in global environmental politics. Most of the world's prime ministers and presidents journeyed to the Earth Summit, as it was called, including then-president George H. W. Bush (in a visit most noted for its brevity). Also attending were tens of thousands of other participants from in and out of government. The event won global media coverage. And the results seemed impressive. The Rio meeting and surrounding sessions produced the ambitious "Agenda 21" plan for sustainable development in the 21st century, and it spawned a number of agreements that accelerated the development of global environmental law, including measures that ultimately led to the Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change and to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, which governs trade in genetically modified organisms. Ten years later, at the UN's World Summit on Sustainable Development, in Johannesburg, the mood was palpably different. The excitement and optimism of Rio were long gone. Attendance was down, and many government leaders were more inclined to back away from previously agreed-upon goals and programs than to embrace new



*A new road slices through the Brazilian rain forest. International law's failure to stop many forms of environmental degradation has led to a new emphasis on political organization.*

ones. There were no treaty signings or ambitious new agendas. The Johannesburg summit produced vague joint declarations and—according to Greenpeace—an “action plan” for the implementation of international commitments that lacked both a plan and action.

Long before the delegates gathered in South Africa in 2002, several cruel realities had combined to deflate the hopes and promises of Rio: the continuing degradation of the global environment, the growth of economic inequality, and the decreasing availability of foreign-aid dollars. After 2001, terrorism also began to divert attention and resources away from environmental and social programs. At the same time, many people who had been involved in such endeavors came to see the treaties, declarations, and freshly inked international laws as too circumscribed and too weak to tackle enormous problems. Many wondered whether summitry had become an expensive, exhausting distraction. While it would be wrong to say that the environmental community has turned away from international law, it's certainly true that the past 10 years have encouraged it to look toward other means of achieving its goals.

To understand how the earlier optimism yielded to bitter disappointment, one must begin with an essential fact: At the international level, central governing authority does not exist. The importance of that fact in the environmental arena cannot be overstated. The key elements of environmental cooperation include treaties and the small organizations that administer them (so-called secretariats), larger intergovernmental organizations such as UN bodies and the World Bank, international conferences or summits involving national officials, and a set of financial mechanisms to help pay

for these various components. International environmental governance is, in short, a complex and generally uncoordinated patchwork of relatively weak laws and underfunded and understaffed organizations—a far cry from the image of big, bureaucratic, sovereignty-stealing monoliths conjured up by critics. As a rule, powerful countries rarely propose to strengthen these international institutions. (This is not true in all areas of international law: Europeans are pushing for a strong International Criminal Court, while the United States favors more comprehensive and centralized international authority to promote liberal markets and enforce free-trade agreements.)

Officials in and out of government, from countries rich and poor, have become more outspoken in expressing their fatigue with international governance as a way of doing business. With good reason. Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment, in Stockholm, the number of environmental treaties, summit meetings, and joint declarations by national leaders has increased dramatically. Some 500 regional and global treaties have been signed, dealing with such issues as pol-

INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE IS AN UNCOORDINATED PATCHWORK OF RELATIVELY WEAK LAWS.

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lution in shared rivers, lakes, and seas; wetlands protection; fisheries management; transnational air pollution; desertification; and trade in endangered species and hazardous wastes. Most treaties generate their own secretariats and commit governments to sets of domestic rules and regulations, periodic data-gathering and reports, and endless rounds of meetings, conferences, and committee work. All of this activity is uncoordinated and often overlapping and contradictory, and bureaucratic turf battles between governments and international organizations make coordination all the more unlikely.

Because few international agreements include the same set of nations, there's a hodgepodge of legally binding commitments across the globe. Various individual countries in the European Union have signed on to more than 60 different international environmental agreements. Even within individual national governments, coordination is poor at the point when agreements are negotiated. A U.S. delegation, for example, will likely include officials from many different government agencies, which will not necessarily share the same policy goals and priorities.

**P**am Chasek, a coeditor of *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, distinguishes between “convention fatigue” such as I’ve described above and “summit fatigue,” which stems, at least in part, from the growing number of increasingly expansive and overlapping global and regional meetings. The trend accelerated after the end of the Cold War, as UN summits were held on broad issues associated with environmental quality, economic and social development, children, women, population growth, and public health. Various regional groups of countries also hold regular summits, not to mention the periodic global and regional trade conferences and the annual Group of Eight summits. All this summitry, critics contend, consumes large amounts of time, energy, and money—and produces only more ambitious and unrealistic goals and declarations. In Johannesburg, some even suggested that the South African summit should be the last of its kind.

“Donor fatigue” is another plague afflicting the international community. Over the past decade, global levels of foreign assistance declined, as did the willingness of wealthy countries to pay their UN dues, join (and pay for) peacekeeping operations, and actually ante up the funds they had pledged at international conferences and summits. Even the treaties and organizations established to protect Earth’s ozone layer, widely considered among the most successful and efficient international efforts in history, persistently receive less money for their administrative apparatus than donor countries pledge—and this sum is much less than what is needed!

For their part, the poorer countries that receive environmental aid are tired of the cumbersome, bureaucratic, and frequently paternalistic conditions that donors attach. Moreover, the wealthy states of the global North have far more influence on the content of most environmental agreements than the poor developing states of the global South. Negotiators from poor countries tend to have far fewer resources to prepare for negotiations—less staff support, less access to scientific and technical information, and, often, simply less negotiating experience. The sheer number of treaties and summits is a great problem. In some environmental ministries, international travel is one of the largest line items in the budget.

Overall, there's a nagging sense that the plodding, incremental approach to international environmental problems is not working. Many of the shortcomings have been spotlighted recently in frank reports issued by UN agencies, the World Bank, think tanks, and environmental organizations. What's surprising is not the failings, most of which are familiar to observers of environmental politics, but the reports' honesty about them: the time-consuming and expensive negotiation and ratification processes; the generally weak, least-common-denominator outcomes that result from the desire (or perceived need) to achieve consensus; the chronic absence of a capacity to monitor countries' compliance with treaties and to punish their violations; the ill-coordinated and sometimes contradictory requirements in the treaties; and the lack in many countries of the organizational, technical, and financial means to meet commitments. Addressing these problems will require leadership (and probably money) from the world's most powerful nations—and that has not been forthcoming.

Because there's no central authority in the international community, *national* leadership (and sponsorship) is essential. Yet the world's wealthiest and most powerful countries have shown little leadership. The United States is an obvious example. Government officials often criticize environmental treaties, conferences, and goals, but they make few serious attempts to improve environmental governance. In fact, they seem to work much harder to undermine the pacts they dislike, such as the Kyoto Protocol, than to support those they favor.

**D**espite all the disappointments, there have been many successes in the past 30 years. Given the tremendous diversity of interests around the world, the fact that agreement has been achieved on so many treaties is itself an accomplishment. So is the recent effort to honestly confront and overcome the failings of this 30-year effort. There's been a big increase in cooperative research in many fields—and thus in our knowledge of the natural environment and its relationship to human health and well-being. International efforts have also produced hard results, notably in dealing with the depletion of the ozone layer and protecting (at least temporarily) elephants, whales, and other animal species from extinction.

The new internationalism has also played a significant role in giving global reach to concepts such as biodiversity, sustainable development, and ecosystem management, and to the debates surrounding them. The very notion that the state is responsible for protecting environmental quality on behalf of its citizens owes its acceptance to international efforts. When the UN Conference on the Human Environment convened in Stockholm in 1972, many public officials and ordinary citizens around the globe did not see environmental issues as “their” concern, and most states did not have large bodies of environmental law or environmental protection ministries. Now they do. In virtually every country—including those in the developing world—the environment is a leading political issue. The UN summits deserve at least some of the credit for these changes.

Summit meetings and new laws may have their limitations, but it's hard to imagine that *less* international cooperation would be an improvement. Such meetings and laws continue to play a valuable role. They legitimize environmental norms and ideas and provide standards against which national officials can be judged.

The Bush administration has rejected both the Kyoto Protocol and any serious domestic policy proposal to slow, much less reduce, the rate of U.S. emissions of carbon dioxide (currently almost 25 percent of the global total) and other climate change gases—and it has done so just as nearly every other developed country has joined the fledgling international effort. American isolation has itself become part of the domestic debate about climate change and a powerful argument in the hands of those who favor a stronger American policy. Nowhere is the international effect more apparent than in the burgeoning number of climate-change action plans and emissions-reduction goals drawn up by U.S. cities and states (and recently catalogued by the Pew Center on Climate Change), many of which cite the lack of national policy as a justification for action.

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If there is to be a post-Johannesburg “era of implementation,” in which governments keep as well as make promises, citizens and national leaders will need to hold public officials accountable. International environmental institutions can’t make states do what they don’t want to do, but citizens can. It is increasingly clear that treaties rely not only on states for implementation but on citizen activism and national environmental leadership. If citizens do not demand strong environmental policy from their own governments, no number of treaties and summits will “save the Earth.”

In no country is this clearer than in the United States. If Americans want more effective environmental law, they should demand that their own government actually abide by the promises it so often makes and so rarely keeps. Because U.S. citizens use a disproportionate share of the Earth’s resources, they have a disproportionately large opportunity to improve its environment by enacting strong and sensible policy at home and supporting—rather than undermining—international environmental laws and organizations. If U.S. policymakers don’t like the Kyoto Protocol, they could do more than complain that it’s unfair to the world’s wealthiest and most powerful country. They could adopt reasonable policies of their own designed to efficiently reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases in the United States.

Thanks to the past 30 years of global environmental summits and treaties, most of us know we are all in this together. The globalization of environmental politics is likely to continue, because the increasing consumption of resources and the large-scale alteration of the environment by humans will necessitate greater international cooperation. But success in protecting the environment will require a more explicit acknowledgment that treaties and high-profile conferences are no substitute for leadership at home. International cooperation can legitimize and support that leadership, but without greater international authority, it can’t protect the environment. That job is left to us. □