

Kyoto From the Bottom Up

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→ The Kyoto Protocol set the world goal of significantly reducing carbon emissions by 2012 and holding them stable from that point. It put the onus on developed countries – by far the biggest polluters - requiring them to cut emissions to almost 30% below current levels.

That's great – we need this to happen. But it's only half the story.

As you would expect of an international agreement, Kyoto focused on governments, setting targets and creating mechanisms to accelerate reductions. But it left out something – individual action.

If you look at the major sources of emissions – power generation, deforestation, agriculture, industry, transport and buildings – government undoubtedly has a critical role to play. It can set the rules across many of these sectors, demanding reductions or encouraging alternatives. It can enforce a shift to renewable energy sources, build public transport systems, and create new environmental building standards.

But when you look at it, government effort can only go so far. The rest is down to individuals – choosing what car we buy, or how much we drive, whether we turn our thermostat down and our lights off, and so on. Individual actions are just as critical if we are to halt global warming and minimize climate change.

However, this is the nebulous realm of human behavior, and Kyoto, understandably, did not go there. How do you define a protocol to make individuals across the globe take responsibility for their contribution to global warming? Sounds impossible.

The good news, however, is that it is now incredibly easy for individuals to connect with one another and gather round a shared resource or project, even on a global scale. Facebook has proved that – from 0 to more than 40 million users in just three years. All these people have instantly learned a new way of communicating and sharing their lives and dreams. Myspace, YouTube, Wikipedia, etc., also prove the same thing – that the Web now makes spontaneous gatherings and aggregations of individuals easy.

So it is possible to get to very large numbers of people quickly, irrespective of geography. And Facebook, Myspace etc., prove that people want to gather in this way if the objective appeals to them. The challenge in terms of climate change is to find the right concept that will strike a chord and engage millions of us in efforts

to reduce our personal and communal carbon footprints.

Others have tried. Live Earth took the global rock concert road in an effort to raise awareness, but failed to make a breakthrough.

We can't give up. We live in a world under threat because the environment has never been factored into our economic systems. This leads to crazy outcomes where it can take more water to make a plastic bottle than the water it will hold, and where Fiji, which needs clean drinking water, ships bottled water to the US, which has drinkable tap water – not to mention the carbon footprint of producing and transporting the water.

Our planet is damaged and off balance because environmental impact has been ignored. We have to change our ways and restore the Earth. Governments must act, but so must individuals. Mayors can ban the use of city funds to buy bottled water where perfectly good tap water is available, as the mayors of San Francisco and Salt Lake City have done. The rest is down to the citizens – to us as we make choices of what we buy and how we live.

We now have a tremendous opportunity. We know the problem – human activity is interfering with the climate with potentially devastating consequences. We have the imperative – individual action is as important as government effort in reducing greenhouse gases. And we have the tools – the Web and applications that allow for millions to come together in a common cause. What we need now is a Facebook for global warming.

Kyoto took a top down approach to climate change, via government targets and incentives. We need a bottom up approach as well – one that harnesses the power of social networks on the Web to create an environment where individual impact is part of a global collective effort for change.

ABOUT ZEROFOOTPRINT

→ Zerofootprint is a socially responsible enterprise whose mission is to apply technology, design and risk management to the massive reduction of our environmental footprint. We operate both in the for-profit and charitable domains through two entities, Zerofootprint Software and Zerofootprint Foundation using shared technology.