

The Tree Trap: Envoys Could Not Agree on Value of Forests to World Environment

By ANDREW C. REVKIN

THE HAGUE, Nov. 25 _ In the end, the negotiators got lost in the trees.

After 11 days of draining and unwieldy bargaining by 170 countries over the rules for a proposed treaty to fight global warming, by this morning all the issues had been narrowed to just this one: How much credit should big forested countries get for all that photosynthesis?

In that natural chemical process, trees and other plants draw carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, out of the air and stash the carbon in the ground or in wood, forming what experts have called carbon "sinks" and helping to cool the climate.

The United States, the world's largest producer of greenhouse gases and the country that potentially stands to face the greatest cost under any treaty, had originally said it might try to meet half its emission-cutting goal in just that way.

But other industrialized nations with fewer open spaces suspected the Americans of trying to find a way out of actually taking the hard steps of reducing their use of fossil fuels and of trying to get something for nothing in effect, playing a "get out of jail free" card.

Despite a report issued during the conference from the Energy Department saying that the United States could reduce its fuel use through fairly simple, inexpensive changes with almost no harm to the economy conservation measures have long been resisted in a country where big cars, low gasoline prices and economic growth have come to be considered nearly inalienable rights.

But for Europeans, accustomed to high fuel taxes and Green politics, the primary goal of the treaty was to cut emissions at the source, not sop them up after the fact.

Through the final week of the conference, the United States sharply whittled down its original proposals. By dawn today, everyone later agreed, it was very close. There was a palpable sense of optimism that after a decade of debate the world was ready to take a step toward a cooperative, but potentially costly, effort to cut the flow of gases that scientists have linked to the warming climate.

Through the night and early this morning, environmental groups, particularly the World Wildlife Fund, helped the European delegation dissect each complicated new formula for carbon tons and trees, said **Kevin R. Gurney**, a climate and forest expert at Colorado State University who spent hours crunching sets of numbers provided by European negotiators to the wildlife group one after another.

He said the final analysis came down to a 20-million-ton difference between the two sides, a minuscule amount of carbon dioxide in a world spewing 6 billion tons a year into the air.

"I think things came as close as they could come," he said. "I think they were tired and not able to translate some of that into the bottom line, and I think that did freak some of them out."

One result was that a pioneering climate deal sealed with handshakes by a few diplomats deep in the night came unglued when numbers lay under the fluorescent glare of the day.

Tonight, as he somewhat wistfully recalled that fleeting electric moment when an agreement was at hand, Jan Pronk, the president of the two-week climate meeting, compared it to the American presidential election. "At 6 o'clock this morning," he said, "it was too close to call."

People who were intimately involved with that critical moment when the tide turned say it appears that domestic political pressures, exhaustion, an exceptionally tight relationship between the Europeans and environmental groups and simply too much data to sort through in too little time all collided to destroy any environmental detente, at least for now.

In his post-game analysis tonight, Mr. Pronk said he lamented that fundamental problem with technical negotiations. "When experts come to the table, they tend to stay too long," he said. "People leave with more questions than they had before."

On other heated issues, resolution seemed closer still. Delegates had fought over whether nuclear plants should be banned or simply not encouraged in a world combatting global warming. The technology produced no greenhouse gases, after all, but came with a load of other environmental concerns.

The compromise was the gentle verb "refrain."

There was a third bloc, the developing countries, that had its own demands, but those seemed achievable if the wealthy nations could speak with one voice, and in the end they could not.

Mr. Pronk said tonight he was disappointed, but not devastated. "I'm a professional, and I'm a believer," he said, "a professional believer."

But even as he spoke, workers dismantled the trappings of the conference, including blue and green panels bearing the logo he himself had chosen: "Work It Out."