

Summit wheel-spinning

By Bjørn Lomborg

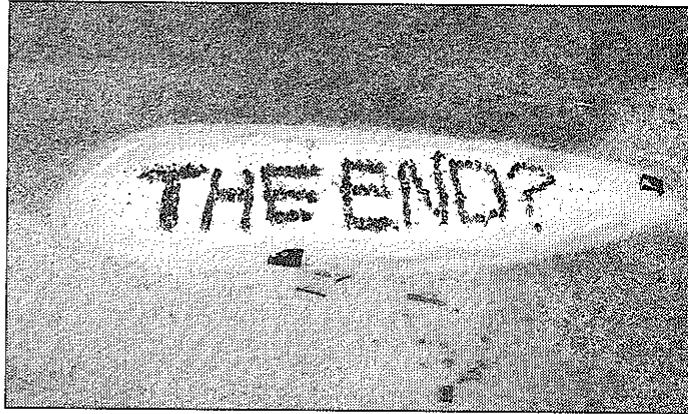
In a week's time, several thousand well-meaning officials from 194 countries will gather in Cancun, Mexico, for yet another global climate summit. And just as they did last year in Copenhagen, and the year before in Poznan, Poland, and in fact every year since 1995 in a variety of locales from Kyoto, Japan, to Marrakech, Morocco, they will fill the air with apocalyptic warnings about what will happen to the planet if we don't cut carbon emissions drastically. After that, they will go home, once again having done nothing meaningful about global warming.

Why do we keep running in fruitless circles when it comes to climate change? Most climate activists will tell you it's the result of a failure of will. If we had the requisite backbone, they insist, we'd simply stop pumping millions of tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere each year as a result of our addiction to fossil fuels such as coal and oil. Since we obviously don't, they argue, we need to find some mechanism, such as imposing hefty carbon taxes, that would effectively force us to do the right thing.

Why fossil fuels?

This notion is attractively simple, but it ignores a fundamental reality. The reason we continue to use fossil fuels is not because we're weak or lazy or enjoy annoying Al Gore. Rather, it's a matter of basic economics. As energy sources go, fossil fuels are much cheaper and more efficient than any of the green alternatives such as solar or wind power. And even as hard a climate hard-liner as James Hansen of NASA concedes, "As long as fossil fuels are the cheapest form of energy, they are going to continue to be used."

This is why developing nations such as China and India are so resistant to the idea of drastically cutting their carbon emissions. And it's why the developed world has found it impossible to live up to any of the grand carbon-cutting promises made over the past two decades at climate summits in Rio, Kyoto, and most recently Copenhagen. It's not that Third World governments don't understand the link between greenhouse gases and



By Lou Demattels, Spectral Q, via AP

To the U.N.: Environmental activists send a message Saturday for the upcoming Climate Change Conference in Cancun, Mexico.

Dealing with climate change isn't a matter of will power; it's a matter of economics. Next week's meeting in Cancun should focus on real solutions.

global warming; it's that without the cheap energy that fossil fuels provide, there is absolutely no way they will be able to lift billions of their citizens out of poverty. And it's not that we in the West don't get the climate equation either; it's that very few of us are willing to suffer higher prices and slower economic growth.

Fortunately, there is a way out of this impasse. Instead of trying to solve global warming by making fossil fuels cost more, why not concentrate on making the green alternatives cost less? If we could make solar and wind and other green energy technologies competitive with coal and oil, no one would have to be compelled to do anything — everyone would switch over in a heartbeat.

How do we bring down the cost of green energy? Think about the last great technological revolution that changed the world — the digital one. We didn't promote the scientific breakthroughs that wound up putting PCs in hundreds of millions of homes by making slide rules and typewriters more expensive. Rather, it was the result of massive investments in research and development in areas such as solid-state physics and computer science. Why aren't we doing the same with green energy technologies?

Taken as a whole, the nations of the world spend a paltry \$2 billion a year on green energy

R&D. As a result, these technologies are progressing at a snail's pace. We can (and should) do better. But it will take a real commitment — something on the order of roughly \$100 billion a year (or roughly 0.2% of global GDP) to produce the kind of game-changing breakthroughs that ushered in the digital revolution.

'Transform our world'

All kinds of exciting technologies could benefit from this sort of investment — everything from artificial photosynthesis (which would enable us to store solar energy cheaply and efficiently) to fourth-generation nuclear reactors (which would consume existing nuclear waste) — any one of which could change our future for the better.

In the end, most of these bets probably won't pay off, but all we need to transform our world is for a few of them to work. But to do that, we first need to recognize that solving global warming isn't a matter of backbone — it's a matter of economics.

Bjørn Lomborg is author of The Skeptical Environmentalist and Cool It, head of the Copenhagen Consensus Center, and adjunct professor at Copenhagen Business School. Cool It, a documentary about him and his work, opened in the U.S. on Nov. 12.