

Conscience must triumph over theatrics in Nagoya

BY ERIC JOHNSTON

COP10

COP OUT OR COEVOLVE?

DELEGATES, when you arrive in Nagoya, Japan this October for the UN's 10th conference on biodiversity, you'll be meeting at a decisive moment. For the agreements you reach, or fail to, at COP10* may well determine whether many forms of life survive or die out — including the large-brained, spiritually-inclined but as yet self-defeating, tool-making ape, a relative newcomer to this biodiverse world.

Moreover, given the bitter failure of last December's climate change conference in Copenhagen, what you achieve in Nagoya will affect not only biodiversity but also global warming. COP10 in Japan is the last major UN conference before the world gathers in Mexico in late November for yet another round of climate change talks. Delegates and NGOs heading to Cancun will be nervously watching the outcome of your negotiations, and your success or failure will directly impact their chances for reaching a climate change agreement that makes a genuine difference.

But in and of itself, COP10 is extremely important. One of the most idealistic yet crucial goals is to secure a treaty committing your nations to binding targets for preserving biodiversity over the coming decade. Make no mistake: Nagoya is not merely an excuse for another UN gabfest. As UN negotiators, you know that UN meetings are like sausage-making — slow, messy, involving all manner of ingredients, and observed with a feeling of queasiness. That said, unless the UN process, including its limitations, is understood by conference veterans and rookies alike, COP10 will be fated to fail before the microphones are even switched on. This need not happen.

TO PARTICIPANTS AND LAY READERS ALIKE: Whether you're sitting in the main hall, back in the pressroom, manning an NGO booth, or following the conference from far away with ever-increasing concern, you have a role to play. Here, then, for readers at all levels of involvement, is a basic guide to what takes place at UN conferences — your program notes, as it were, for COP10. Based on years of personal experience and spiced with anecdotal chagrin, what follows may shed some light on how we can progress from mere good intentions to a binding United Nations treaty.

*10th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity.



ART BY TIERY LE

STEP ONE: *The Script*

Every UN conference begins with a draft text of the proposed treaty, the codex upon which official discussions proceed. The text that arrives in Nagoya will already have been edited countless times. And the working draft for COP10 will make for heavy reading: drafts of UN treaties can run to more than 200 pages, and their dense jargon, Delphic phrasing and alphabet soup of acronyms makes deciphering the exact meaning of many of their phrases, let alone sentences or paragraphs, a daunting task.

During negotiations, each line of text is debated, criticized, parsed for hidden meaning, and analyzed for implications regarding matters of international and domestic concern, whether political, social, economic, scientific, ethnic, gender-related, or religious. Provided all goes smoothly, delegates will agree to the final wording. But imagine a room teeming with politicians, lawyers, academics, editors and interpreters, each cluster representing one of up to 193 UN member countries, aided in turn by UN staff, all trying to reach agreement. Now picture each of these individuals having to check with their bosses back home to see if the proposed compromise wording, or even a newly inserted adjective, meets with approval. By comparison, The Council of Nicaea was a church picnic.

To further spice up the sausage, any nation's delegation may offer its own alternate wording during the conference, even if such words were not in the copies of the draft that low-paid UN staffers labored through the night to copy and distribute to every delegate by the following morning's session. Before any new language is formally debated, though, "informal" meetings will customarily be held on the sidelines, where suggested changes can be discussed in relative privacy.

For instance, a delegate from Fredonia seeking controversial text alterations would first sit down informally with the conference's top UN official, the conference president (usually a senior political figure from the host country, elected at the start by the delegates to serve in that capacity for the meeting's duration). This conversation would also include delegates from the most influential nations (the U.S., China, India, and a few European countries) as well as regional blocs like the Group of 77 Nations or the European Union. Sometimes representatives from Africa, the Caribbean nations, or the world's small-island states are also present. All sides cajole, plea-bargain, and test the waters for any possible changes in the hope of avoiding a drawn-out floor fight that could chew up precious conference time and create unwanted rancor. Strong support from other key delegates for Fredonia's proposal increases the likelihood that it will not only be formally introduced but also formally adopted. Time needed for these "impromptu," unofficial gatherings all through the conference is one major reason why events like COP10 tend to be marathon sessions of ten days to two weeks.

At this point, though, delegates are still working with the official text that does not yet contain Fredonia's proposal. The manuscript may well contain sentences like the one below, which was part of the working draft at December's climate change conference in Copenhagen:

Parties to the Convention agree that by 2020 developed nations [shall reduce] [make efforts to reduce] their greenhouse gas emissions by [X] [at least 25 percent] based on [1990 levels] [other base year].



Will negotiators ad-lib, or read off cue cards provided by industrial groups and political lobbyists?

Like a climate change agreement, forging a biodiversity agreement in Nagoya will eventually come down to discussion over two sets of numbers: scientific and financial. Because these are the most controversial parts of any UN negotiation, it's usually a good bet that many of the bracketed phrases and X's in the COP10 codex at the start of the conference will still be there near the end. That's when the top bosses (presidents and prime ministers in Copenhagen, senior ministers at Nagoya's COP10) dramatically fly in, either to fill-in the blanks and save the day, or to let the treaty crash and burn because no agreement over the final numbers was ever reached.

And make no mistake, a UN conference like COP10 really is about numbers, even if it's decided at the end to sign a treaty without any. Every delegate agrees that protection of biodiversity is a grand idea and that action needs to be taken. But how many hectares of hardwood forest do we save from the chainsaws? How many square miles of ocean do we declare off limits to ships hunting beluga whales or Atlantic bluefin tuna? What percentage of rainforests in Brazil and Indonesia, or wetlands in Hokkaido, should be set aside, and how much of their biologically diverse plant life that forms the basis for medicines researched, developed and sold by Big Pharma should be the property of the indigenous peoples who have lived in those forests for centuries? Finally, how much will all of this cost, and who will write the checks?

Domestic politics of the moment also comes into play. When international scientific recommendations and local political needs are in sync, a country's delegate will be a fervent believer in the sanctity of the scientific method. But when the numbers (scientific and fiscal) are at odds with the politics, that same delegate will shout out every excuse, rationale, or half-truth possible to discredit the science and obstruct agreement. He or she will vilify the UN's mild-mannered cardinals of science, recasting them as evil inquisitors seeking to persecute the innocent.

At times, the tactics used are designed to distract one and all from the inconvenient truths that the science proves. Expect to hear dubious claims about ancient historical or cultural norms. Be on the alert for covert or even overt suggestions that the scientific conclusions are those of racists

and imperialists. And anticipate appeals to the delegates to be politically "realistic" — a line of attack that consoles as it counsels: "A deeply flawed treaty is better than none."

When the science is too irrefutable, the recommendations too widely accepted, when the other delegates and even the media are deaf to the bellowing of the naysayers, strategies will shift to the icily methodological. Watch for well-funded efforts to discredit the science through deft diversions, like pointing to isolated facts that seemingly cast doubt on the overall conclusion, or tactics such as ignoring statistical principles and common sense by insisting that, while the vast majority of scientists might be in agreement, a few mavericks are not. Would-be thwarters of the process will thus argue that many more years of research (preferably funded by the American Enterprise Institute) and more "public debate" (preferably led by members of the Fortune 500) are prerequisites (i.e., stumbling blocks) to the signing of any agreements.

As the final stage of negotiations dawns, some combination of these devices is often employed by all sides. At COP10, the numbers debate is unlikely to be as intense as in Copenhagen. This is because, at present, no single international body of biodiversity experts makes recommendations to the UN, whereas the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) does for global warming (although there is broad agreement to create one during COP10. See below). At Copenhagen, numbers like 1.5 (the maximum temperature rise in degrees Celsius that island nations can tolerate over the next century without being swallowed by rising oceans), 25 percent (the minimum amount developed nations were supposed to cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 to stave off irreversible global warming), and 1990 (the year whose levels the reduction should be based upon) were the subject of heated contention; for two weeks, 130 world leaders, 190 UN delegates, 200,000 NGO representatives — and 21 million supporters of a climate change treaty who rallied worldwide halfway through the conference — debated, demonstrated and, occasionally, physically clashed over what the final treaty should look like.

"By the year 2020, a 25 percent decrease from 1990 levels." These numbers originated with the IPCC back in 2007. They not only earned that organization, along with Al Gore, a Nobel Peace Prize, but also made the IPCC enemy number

one among the cynical and the corrupt, and those fearful of social change or ignorant of basic science, whether by circumstance or by choice. As mentioned above, biodiversity still lacks a single, cohesive assemblage of experts with the international influence of the IPCC. The good news is that, prior to COP10, the UN General Assembly was expected to approve the creation of the “Intergovernmental Science Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES).” The group’s mission will be to “carry out peer reviews of scientific literature in order to provide governments with ‘gold standard’ reports”, according to the BBC. The bad news is that it will be a few more years until the new body can provide UN delegates with coordinated policy advice. That begs the question: without a consensus group of scientific experts helping to guide COP10’s script development, will negotiators ad-lib, or simply read off cue cards provided by their country’s industrial groups and political lobbyists?

STEP TWO: *Casting Call & Rehearsals*

No Hollywood production rivals a UN conference for the sheer number and variety of stars, character actors and extras. We’ll meet the Greek chorus in the pressroom momentarily. But first, the NGOs. The stagecraft of these non-governmental organizations ranges from the street-theater antics of college-age kids parading around the convention center in costumes, waving signs and chanting slogans, to *otaku*-obsessive/compulsive types holding briefings that anybody with a pair of PhDs and years of field experience could easily follow, to the glitzy, Las Vegas-like showmanship of “astroturf” organizations posing as grassroots NGOs while shilling for Big Oil or Big Pharma.

But these players will always be upstaged by the major international NGOs, who wield great power behind the scenes. Media-savvy and diplomatically astute, these NGOs tote PowerPoint presentations and microphones that always work flawlessly. At any UN conference, growing numbers

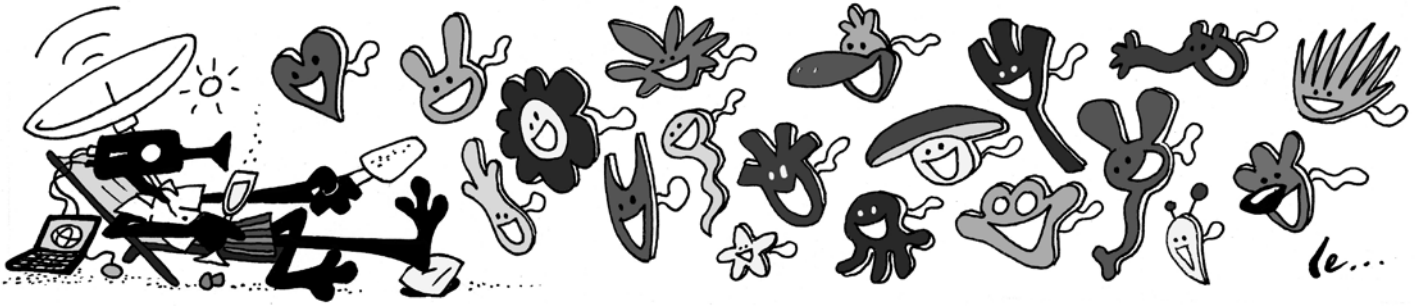
of delegations from Africa and Asia rely heavily on the bigger NGOs, not only for advice but also for grunt work, and some NGOs even serve as de facto diplomatic staff for countries unable to afford the dozens of gofers and underlings that delegations from the big shot nations can call upon. Still other NGOs serve as unauthorized translation agencies for the bureaucrats and media of whichever countries they represent. Crucially, these NGOs inform a client country’s delegates and media about what was really being said earlier in the day, when these attendees were “listening intently” to those who may as well have been speaking in tongues, and feigning understanding of the highly nuanced language and technical jargon which was roughly (often very roughly) being translated into one of the six official UN languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish), none of which happens to be their native language.

Then there are the “cast extras” whose precise purpose is not always clear. On the first day of the Copenhagen conference, just outside the mammoth media center, I was approached by a young man wearing a red clown nose, fake horn-rimmed glasses, and a bowler hat. He was carrying a sign that said “Hackers Wanted” and asked if I would help support his undefined, but legally questionable, mission, and promised great wealth if I agreed. Being something of a Luddite and having no wish to see the inside of a Danish prison in December, I politely declined. Meanwhile, in the corners of the conference hall cafes sat several other suspicious characters with paranoid eyes, nervous twitches and grim expressions. Some cast furtive glances at passersby; others muttered conspiratorially into their cell phones. Who were they? Anarchists? Oil lobbyists? Nobody knew. And then came the usual walk-ons and special guests, the armies of business consultants and respected academics, plus the odd celebrity (a former U.S. Vice President, a Hollywood actress of moderate fame, an African Nobel Peace Prize Laureate).

And, finally, there are the stars, the lead UN delegates, who, whether they’re the twice-convicted brother-in-law of the country’s Prime Minister, or the semi-literate but wealthy old school chum of its President, must be referred to as “Excellency” or “Ambassador.” Customarily aloof, especially if they hail from a major country, these few elect don’t feel the need

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to hobnob with the unwashed rabble in the pressroom or the NGO center. By sharp contrast, the top negotiators from nations on the front lines of biodiversity loss and climate change can be quite chummy at UN conferences, anxious to get their message out to all and sundry.

STEP THREE: *Lights! Camera! Debate!*

Thespian metaphors are exceptionally apt because, despite demands for tangible progress in the talks issued from the audience (i.e. the millions of people around the world — not to mention, in the case of COP10, all the other mute species for whose benefit this performance is allegedly taking place) for UN conferences to come off as improvisational theater, established protocol and UN internal politics dictate that discussions look and sound like badly-acted daytime dramas, with stilted soliloquies, trite sentiments and exaggerated body language.

But don't be fooled into believing you're watching a troupe of talentless actors. Consciously or not, each UN rep has at least a passing familiarity with the actor's methods perfected by the characters in Italian Renaissance political "operas" like Machiavelli's *The Prince* and Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*. They are also versed in ancient texts like Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and modern works like Eric Hoffer's *The True Believer*. They know just what to say and how to say it, how not to phrase it, and what to leave unsaid. Unsurprisingly, their rhetoric is usually constrained by their political masters. But they too are masters — at "reading the wind," as young Japanese nowadays say, and adept at speaking on behalf of their bosses in ways that allow the politicians to claim all credit if agreement is reached and escape blame when it's not.

And above it all stands the Greek Chorus, the group all the other actors love and loathe, covet and reject, respect and fear. Like the Chorus in *Medea*, the news media call the play-by-play and offer an array of background and commentary to help the audience follow the performance. Great expense and effort will go into ensuring that members of the Fourth Estate making the trip to Nagoya are coddled, pampered, and given every opportunity to cover and frame the conference exactly the way the UN and host country Japan want it to be framed. In Copenhagen, the roughly 3,000 journalists and other media

types worked from a facility the size of two soccer pitches, where tables, chairs, LAN lines, extra computers and fax machines were provided free of charge. They also had access to a media-only cafeteria. Two dozen volunteer staffers were at their beck and call to help with everything from arranging interviews to unraveling computer problems. Remarkably, with video screens throughout the pressroom tuned in to the UN discussions, or announcing the day's press briefing schedule, and with NGO reps incessantly dropping off press releases, many journalists hardly felt any need to leave the pressroom. Yes, just sit back, have a pastry and some fresh-brewed coffee, read the press release, download the video, check out the blog, and follow the Twitter and Facebook postings. If you're so inclined, drop by the briefing later today or join us in the hotel ballroom this evening for smoked salmon, cocktails and a copy of our latest media packet.

That's right, friends. No need whatsoever to think for yourselves or worry about whether or not you're getting the real story. All will be explained, complete with photos and broadcast-quality video, every need fulfilled, and well before your deadline.

This is not to suggest that all, or even most, journalists at a UN forum are patsies. Actually, the media center is a "Casablanca" movie set full of wounded heroes and outright cynics trading truths, rumors and conspiracy theories, or sending up trial balloons. It's the one place everybody with a floor pass goes to in hopes of finding out what's really going on — or for others, the zone in which to spin their message or meme. Although an army of NGO bloggers will be bivouacked outside the COP10 pressroom, the musings of the media will be watched just as closely as the proceedings themselves. In Copenhagen, what Amy Goodman of "Democracy Now!" was saying on the air, the pointed questions David Corn of *Mother Jones* and Charles Hanley of the Associated Press were asking U.S. negotiators, and the storylines and viewpoints the dozens, perhaps hundreds, of Chinese correspondents were offering greatly mattered to all.

As of this writing, no one will venture a guess as to how many journalists will show up for COP10, or, more importantly, what kind of journalists will cover the story. Copenhagen drew reporters well versed in climate change as well as general assignment reporters more keen on the political maneuvering than on disappearing glaciers. Nagoya's COP10 may well attract far more specialist reporters than generalists. However, this conference, unlike Copenhagen, will discuss a broad spectrum of complex issues not easily condensed into a

300-word article or a 30-second sound bite by those who barely passed their high school biology class. Even more importantly, mainstream media news editors do not appear to see biodiversity as quite as pressing a problem as climate change, for reasons discussed elsewhere in this issue of KJ and at www.cop10.org. And that brings us to the final phase...

STEP FOUR: *Audience Participation*

What happens at COP10 largely depends on how engaged those people are who are not physically present in the Nagoya International Congress Hall. A great deal will be riding on how much palpable pressure the UN delegates, NGOs, and the media feel from people like you, dear reader, world citizens who express their deep concerns.

Compared to climate change, biodiversity has traditionally had a much lower profile among world leaders, NGOs, the media, and the general public. Is that starting to change? In the months preceding COP10, the answer appears to be

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from people like you

yes. The tragic oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico has nevertheless demonstrated, in a way no UN conference or NGO ever could, just how critical biodiversity protection truly is and what happens when “Drill, Baby, Drill” is no longer a mindless mantra of right-wing lunatics but official government policy. Copenhagen’s failure may have also, paradoxically, helped raise COP10’s profile. In 1992, at the Rio Summit, climate change and biodiversity were recognized as being interlinked. But for various reasons, the two issues were “separated at birth” and put on parallel discussion tracks within the UN. Now, however, with Copenhagen’s failure and the oil spill, a growing number of scientists and NGOs are asking, quietly, whether two decades after Rio it isn’t high time for the UN to reunite climate change and biodiversity in order to get the best possible treaties for the planet as a whole. COP10 may spur more people to ask that question.

Finally, the fact that UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon will convene a meeting on biodiversity with world leaders just before the September General Assembly means that, finally, there is the kind of high-level engagement on biodiversity issues of the kind we’ve not yet seen. The long-term effects of the gathering are uncertain, of course. But, coming only about three weeks before COP10, the meeting will focus a greater degree of attention on Nagoya than would otherwise be the case.

COP10’s ultimate success or failure, however, ultimately depends on whether or not those inside the conference hall not only hear the concerns of the outside world but also act

upon them. There are many coming to COP10 or involved with its planning who would like nothing more than to stage a smooth production that ends with a bow to an appreciative audience that is absent critics who didn’t like the show’s plot line or characters. That must not happen, and there are many acts of civil disobedience that concerned readers might commit before, during, and after COP10. These include: (1) contacting key politicians and asking them what their country plans to discuss at COP10; (2) contacting key media and their advertisers and telling them you want to see lots of COP10 coverage; and (3) contacting NGOs, asking what they plan to do, and offering assistance where possible. Those are, of course, the basics. A full list can be seen at www.cop10.org/biodiversity/actions.htm

Given the sky-high stakes involved at COP10, yet another UN conference that makes no progress will not be tolerated. And not merely by us humans, who would no doubt then do what we’ve excelled at, which is to rationalize our failures. No, condemnation would come from our biodiverse world itself when, before very long, nature stops providing for us the true foundation of our physical and spiritual well-being: the raw materials, foods, fresh water,

medicines, fuels and even the feelings that sustain our lives and make them worthwhile.

Some might argue that evolution dictates that nature will eventually replace humans with a higher life form, one that can make intelligent decisions and take actions in a timely and meaningful manner on matters of true importance to all species. So, why should we bother getting worked up about COP10? But we can survive, even thrive, by deepening our empathy for other forms of life, by recognizing once and for all in Nagoya that the vital relationships between the cells, organs and systems within our own bodies are mirrored in the larger web of life of which we’re an integral part. If such an awareness drives the dialogue at COP10, then conscience will prevail over theatrics, and we ourselves will have begun to co-evolve into that higher life form. Replenishment of life on Earth will begin with preservation. At COP10, whatever we do, we must not cop out. 🐦

Eric Johnston is a reporter for *The Japan Times*. However, the views expressed within this article, written exclusively for *Kyoto Journal*, are his personal views and not necessarily those of *The Japan Times*.