

Global Goals:
Commentary on the Parallels between the Kyoto Protocol and Soccer

CURWOOD: Most of the world's nations are enthusiast about it, except the United States. Europeans support it, despite exorbitant costs to their economies. Some governments use it for political gain. And Japan seems to be signing on only for the prestige. We're not talking about the Kyoto Protocol on global warming. No, it's World Cup Soccer, underway in Japan and South Korea this month. As commentator Gernot Wagner explains, there are a few parallels between the world's favorite environmental issue and its favorite pastime.

WAGNER: After last July's decisive global warming summit in Bonn, The New York Times ran the following headline: "178 nations reach a climate accord; U.S. only looks on." And so goes it for soccer. Billions of people around the planet will tune in the World Cup on TV this month. Only a fraction of them will be in the U.S. Even though at the grassroots level, soccer is a popular sport here. More than seven million youngsters in the U.S. play on soccer teams. Only five million kids play organized baseball.

When you poll most Americans, they'll tell you that climate change is a real and serious problem. But don't mention giving up SUVs or paying higher gas prices. Sacrificing is out of the picture.

It's okay to have kids play the game at the park down the street. But ask TV executives to do without the ads that constantly interrupt U.S. sporting events, and you might be asking too much. Soccer has only one break during its 90-minute run.

On the other hand, consider this parallel between soccer and Kyoto. The U.S. has a knack for developing niche markets that often make sense, but go largely ignored by the rest of the world. For example, the U.S. has long insisted on using market-based mechanisms like emissions trading to cut greenhouse gases. Despite problems with global equity considerations, these trading schemes are a powerful tool in the fight against climate change. In soccer, the U.S. niche is the women's game. As reigning world champions, women's soccer is extremely popular in the States, but is often ignored -- even laughed at -- overseas.

Meanwhile, Japan plays a role on the stage of apparent contradictions. Its upper house of parliament unanimously ratified the Kyoto Protocol a few days ago. But overall,

the nation's support for the treaty has been less than enthusiastic. You might say the same about soccer in Japan where baseball players and sumo wrestlers, rather than goalies and strikers, are the heroes. Still, Japan is pouring tons of money into the World Cup, nearly \$5 billion alone on new stadiums, which will likely go belly-up when the game is over.

And finally, there are the Europeans. Many EU nations are blindly supporting the Kyoto Protocol, despite predictions of exorbitant costs to their economies. And today, they are paying for the World Cup, too. In Europe, the games air live in the morning through early afternoon. Not surprisingly, when labor statistics are tallied for June, sick days will be up and worker productivity down.

But for those seeking convergence of the parallel worlds of soccer and climate politics, there was encouraging news this week. First, the world was stunned when the White House admitted that global warming was real and humans were the cause of it. A few days later, the world was shocked again when the underdog U.S. soccer team beat fifth-ranked Portugal, sparking a wave of soccer fever here. So perhaps, in soccer and climate politics, parallel lines can one day meet.

CURWOOD: Commentator Gernot Wagner is Living on Earth's occasional webmaster, a recent Harvard grad, and he's pulling for Brazil to take the Cup.

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