

**The Kyoto Protocol:
Senior Group Documentary
Tess Campion and Willa Campion**

“Climate change is the defining challenge of our age.” - Ban Ki-moon, CMP 3, Bali, Indonesia

On December 11, 1997, international diplomats came together to sign the Kyoto Protocol, the first agreement to require nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The Kyoto Protocol addressed the international debate over how to prevent what would become the 21st century's most consequential problem—climate change. Ultimately, the failure of the Kyoto Protocol allowed the continued rise of greenhouse gas emissions but its successes established the precedent for future diplomatic climate summits.

From the first agricultural revolution through modern day consumerism, we humans have manipulated the earth's resources to our benefit. In the 1820s, the concept of the greenhouse effect was first introduced. It would be another hundred years before scientists and the public fully grasped the impact human-fueled emissions have on our global society. When humans began extracting fossil fuels to burn them for energy, the resulting release of carbon furthered the greenhouse effect to the point where heat levels no longer simply nurtured life, but harmed it.

As scientists continued to study human effects on the environment, awareness of the negative impact of air pollutants spread from academic communities to the general public. The First Human Environment Conference convened in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, and was attended by representatives of 113 of the United Nations member states. This conference was the first to establish the environment as a primary international concern. The meeting resulted in an Action Plan for the Human Environment, which outlined steps for governments to preserve our climate, with emphasis on better living conditions for all. These steps called for eliminating systems that perpetuated environmental detriment such as colonialism and discrimination, and closing the wealth gap between industrialized and developing nations. Introduced at the conference was what would become a fierce debate between developed and developing nations at future diplomatic summits in Rio and Kyoto, the argument over where global economies and environmental policies meet.

“Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. In this respect, policies promoting or perpetuating apartheid, racial segregation, discrimination, colonial and other forms of oppression and foreign domination stand condemned and must be eliminated.” - Principle 1, Report on the UN Conference of the Human Environment, 1972

In 1990, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its first report that warned of the drastic ramifications of temperatures rising 1.5 degrees celsius above pre-industrial levels. The report cited the socio-economic impacts of global warming and called

for future sustainable development. Climate data like this made the public more aware of the need for a coherent global response. In 1992, the UN hosted a conference on the environment and development in Rio de Janeiro to propose an international agreement regulating global carbon emissions. This conference, known as the Earth Summit, brought together diplomats, scientists, activists, and media representatives from 179 different countries to discuss economic, social, and environmental initiatives that would address global warming. Negotiated in Rio was the principle known as Common But Differentiated Responsibilities, which defined the role played by developed nations, the primary emitters of carbon, versus developing nations, who often bear the brunt of environmental disasters, in preventing climate change. Out of these debates at the Earth Summit emerged the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, a treaty that created a course of action to incorporate sustainable development in governmental policy and prioritize environmental protection as a part of economic growth. This treaty, which categorized countries based on their level of economic development, would become the structure for the Kyoto Protocol.

“The balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climate.” - IPCC 1995 statement

Five years later, more than 190 diplomats from countries worldwide came together in Kyoto, Japan, to negotiate a binding agreement to lower carbon emissions. Recognizing developed nations as the world’s primary emitters, the agreement, known as the Kyoto Protocol, required these nations to meet binding emission reductions, whereas developing nations were not bound. On December 11, 1997, international diplomats signed the Kyoto Protocol, the first agreement to require nations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, setting a precedent for future climate policy.

However, in America, the Senate voted 95 to 0 for prohibiting US participation in a binding treaty to reduce greenhouse gas emissions unless developing nations were required to meet the same targets, due to fears of an economic recession. Knowing this, the Clinton Administration signed the Protocol but never sent it on for ratification. With the failure of the US to participate in the Kyoto Protocol, the debate between developed and developing nations over whether to prioritize national economies or the global environment continued to grow. When George W. Bush took office in 2001, he rescinded the US’s signature from the Protocol. Expressing a perspective contrary to international consensus, Bush went on to question whether climate change was even real or whether humans were to blame, requesting a report from the National Academy of Sciences on the issue. The results of the report stated that humans were to be blamed for the climate crisis. The Bush Administration, backing misinformation spread by the oil industry, continued to maintain that there was no way to know how climate change would affect our world. Even though the scientific community repeatedly disputed the claim, it quickly spread across the US to those who saw a move away from fossil fuels as a threat to their way of life. In America, this shifted the debate away from how to address global warming, to whether human-caused climate change even existed.

“We do not know how much our climate could or will change in the future. We do not know how fast change will occur, or even how some of our actions could impact it.” - President Bush

“The claim that global warming is caused by man-made emissions is simply untrue and not based on sound science.With all of the hysteria, all of the fear, all of the phony science, could it be that man-made global warming is the greatest hoax ever perpetrated on the American people? Sure sounds like it.” - James Inhofe Oklahoma Senator, chaired U.S. Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW)

As term two of the Kyoto Protocol approached, multiple failures of the agreement became more evident. Without the US, a major emitter, ratifying the treaty, the carbon benchmark goal had to be lowered. Incentives for accountability had never been set and loopholes in the Protocol allowed many developed countries to increase pollutants while paying for carbon-cutting projects in developing countries.. By 2007, research proved a need for a 90% reduction in emissions by 2050, however the Kyoto Protocol had only required an average 5.2% cut. Despite being legally binding, carbon emissions in multiple nations continued rising. Due to the withdrawal of the US and the failure to compensate for the carbon they produced, the Protocol did not meet the goal it set of reducing emissions and other major countries such as Russia, Japan, and Canada withdrew as well. Since the Kyoto Protocol, global warming continued to become more evident in extreme temperatures and natural disasters that affected millions. As the need for action grew, so did the debate around what climate policy should look like, and as some leaders in the US argued, whether it was even needed.

When the annual UN Climate Change Conference met in 2015, parties involved developed the Paris Accord, a new agreement that built off of the framework of the Kyoto Protocol. Adapting to the previous failures of a legally binding treaty and due to pressure from the US, the intention of the Paris Accord was to have countries be held accountable for reducing emissions solely by international buy-in, each nation setting their own carbon benchmark regardless of level of development. Still, when Donald Trump took office in 2016, he withdrew the US from the Paris Accord and the failure of Kyoto threatened to be repeated with Paris. The debate around how to combat climate change while maintaining a thriving global economy, endures. But shifting away from fossil fuels requires a shift in mindset among prominent international leaders.

*“The approved texts are a compromise. They reflect the interests, the conditions, the contradictions and the state of political will in the world today. They take important steps, but unfortunately the collective political will was not enough to overcome some deep contradictions.”
- UN Secretary-General António Guterres on the Glasgow climate pact*

The Kyoto Protocol continues to set the precedent for climate policy. While the international community looks to the next annual UN Climate Change conference in Egypt, the debate around how and why governments should limit carbon emissions persists. As the effects of climate change continue to be felt, increased public action pushes governmental policy and environmental equity internationally.

“The truth about the climate crisis is an inconvenient one that means we are going to have to change the way we live our lives.” - Al Gore, former Vice President