

The Cancun Crack-Up

How appropriate that the U.N.'s latest climate summit in the Mexican resort of Cancun should have begun last week with the invocation of an ancient jaguar goddess. When it comes to global warming, there's always been more than a touch of the old-time religion. Unfortunately for the climateers, the rest of the Maya pantheon doesn't seem to be cooperating.

Since last year's collapse of the climate summit in Copenhagen, the chances that one of these periodic U.N. confabs would result in a binding global agreement on carbon caps was remote. The failure of the meeting in Cancun to produce one—which was all but official as we went to press last night—only underscores the point.

Not that anyone should be surprised given the kinds of ideas put forward during the conference. Take the proposal to verify compliance with CO₂ emissions cuts. As the New York Times explained earlier this week, under the deal “countries would declare their emissions reductions targets and provide regular reports on how they were meeting them. . . . There would be no international monitors or inspectors, and no penalties for failing to reach stated goals.” To those disposed to cheat, this is an open invitation.

It's also the kind of formula that someone like Democratic Senator Joe Manchin of West Virginia could easily get behind—with a rifle.

A more realistic view came from the Japanese, who said they would not sign on to any successor to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, which is set to expire in 2012. We remember a visit to our offices in the late 1990s from a Japanese cabinet member who said that Japan was prepared to see as much as 0.5% shaved annually from GDP growth to combat global

warming. More than a decade of economic anemia later, such a promise, for such a goal, would be politically preposterous.

The biggest climate conference achievement:
Sun tans.

Russia and Canada have also indicated that they would be reluctant to sign a Kyoto re-do unless its commitments extend to all states, rather than merely to the guilty rich nations

bound by the original pact. With China now the world's leading producer of greenhouse gases and India's emissions rising rapidly, they're right to be reluctant. But poorer countries are equally reluctant to sign agreements that would slow their economic development with environmental regulations. They're right too.

At Copenhagen last year, delegates tried to paper over these differences with promises of billions in climate-related aid. The poorer countries responded that the sums—some \$100 billion a year from 2020 onwards—were too small given the scale of the disasters that are supposed to befall them. They were haggling for money that isn't there.

The U.S. gives about \$1.7 billion a year in climate-related aid, and last week four GOP Senators sent a letter to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton demanding the Administration “freeze further spending requests to implement international climate change finance programs.” Whoever wins that particular tussle, it isn't going to end in a windfall for, say, the Maldives.

Still, the budgets of environmental bureaucracies and their NGO lampreys rest on keeping fear alive, so the Cancun summit won't be the last of its kind. Our modest suggestion is to move the proceedings somewhere cooler—we hear it's lovely in Yakutsk—so the delegates can experience the effects of an allegedly warming climate for themselves.