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What the UN ban on geoengineering really means

Last week's conference of the UN Convention on Biodiversity appeared to ban any future efforts to "geoengineer" the planet to counter the effects of climate change. But did it? And why was the decision made at the UN's biodiversity meeting in Nagoya, Japan, rather than at next month's climate conference in Mexico?

Campaigners such as the ETC Group said the UN meeting had imposed "a de facto moratorium on geoengineering projects and experiments". In fact, the resolution was worded in a way that placed a moratorium on geoengineering only if it might affect biodiversity.

The 193 signatories to the convention agreed to outlaw such geoengineering projects "until there is an adequate scientific basis on which to justify such activities and appropriate consideration of the associated risks for the environment and biodiversity and associated social, economic and cultural impacts". The agreement exempted "small-scale scientific research studies".

Carbon capture

What this means in practice is far from clear. The convention's definition of geoengineering includes any technology that reduces solar heating of the Earth or increases carbon capture from the atmosphere – though carbon-capture and storage projects can go ahead as long as the carbon comes direct from industrial emissions.

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That would, on the face of it, preclude planting of forests to soak up CO₂, which attracts carbon credits under the existing Kyoto protocol. The Nagoya negotiators apparently felt carbon sink forests passed the test of having an "adequate scientific basis".

Whether they really do is open to question. Where those forests are monocultures, they probably reduce biodiversity. In any case, if they are exempted, why not also exempt efforts to seed the oceans with iron to encourage algae to grow, which will also absorb CO₂ from the air above?

Global sunshades

Almost any activity may affect biodiversity: everything hangs on the degree, and the burden of proof. It might be also be argued that almost all geoengineering options – from putting parasols into space, to making clouds or seeding the air with sulphur to shade the Earth – would benefit biodiversity by stabilising the climate.

Many in the developing world see the whole idea of geoengineering as a ruse by industrialised nations to excuse them from making serious cuts in emissions of the gases causing climate

change. On the other hand, advocates of geoengineering argue that they have a duty to prepare for the possibility of rapid warming that requires a quick fix.

In any event, huge questions remain about who would “press the geoengineering button” and on what authority. John Shepherd, who chaired a study on geoengineering by the UK’s Royal Society, argues that by raising the issue of geoengineering governance, last week’s meeting has done the world a good turn.

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