International Climate Goals

Climate change is being addressed by individuals, activist groups, and large corporations, but it's going to take getting entire nations on board if we want to really meet our climate goals. In this episode of Crash Course Climate and Energy, we'll learn about the alphabet soup that is global climate organization and take a look at some successful – and not-so-successful – international climate policies.

0:01

Video narrator M Jackson appears on screen; images of engineers working on new technologies, children composting, a crowd protesting; Crash Course Climate + Energy intro clip plays

After centuries of continuously burning fossil fuels, humanity is starting to see the consequences. We've created extreme climate change — but today, more and more people are working toward solutions.

Scientists and engineers are developing carbon-free technologies, students are encouraging schools to start composting programs, and activists are putting pressure on organizations to stop funding fossil fuel projects. Just to name a few examples. But ultimately, getting the global change we need also means getting entire nations to cooperate. Which is about as easy as herding cats. I'd know. I have two.

Each country has their own approach to climate policy. They're not obligated to submit to anyone else's authority, and sometimes, following through with their plans… it doesn't always make it on the agenda. But every now and then, these cats manage to pull off something amazing. Hi hi! I'm M Jackson, and this is Crash Course Climate and Energy. [THEME MUSIC]

1:11

Cartoon image of a diverse team of scientists; Textbox: Climate Conference Goals

Since the late 1980s, the international scientific community has researched and compiled information about the climate crisis. They want to know what's up, who's going to be affected, and what we can do about it.

Normally, scientific results are presented at a conference session attended by a few dozen scientists …and maybe one or two members of the press. But because climate change is so important, this conversation has expanded to include representatives from almost every country. It's like the science Avengers.

When these teams get together, they look at the evidence, decide the best course of action, and devise various treaties, and declarations, and agreements to try and address the problem. Together, these documents form the basis for international climate policy. And right now, almost every country is signed on to one or more of the major climate and environmental agreements or groups.

2:06

Scrabble tiles displaying: UNEP, IPCC, UNFCCC; photo of UN Climate Center conference in Denmark; clips of meetings held by the IPCC in different countries

They're called the UNEP, the IPCC, and the UNFCCC. I know. It sounds like I just pulled a handful of Scrabble letters out of a bag, but government agencies, and in particular the UN — sorry, I mean, the United Nations — they DO love their acronyms. (Offscreen) CUT! (M) What? (Offscreen) Technically they're initialisms. (M) Oh, give me a break! Moving on!

First up, the UNEP is the United Nations Environment Programme. It was established in 1972, when the UN made its first declaration to protect the environment, called the Stockholm Declaration. And today, the UNEP is the global authority advocating for the environment.

In 1988, the UNEP teamed up with the World Meteorological Organization to form a subgroup focusing just on climate change: the IPCC. Because if there's anything governments love more than acronyms, it's sub-groups. And sub-committees of the subgroups.

The IPCC stands for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. It's made up of hundreds of scientists, researchers, and policymakers tasked with compiling everything we know about the Earth's climate, climate change, and how to mitigate it and adapt. Since the '80s, they've released 6 comprehensive reports.

3:23

Images of protests, featured signs display: "Listen to the Science IPCC Report"and "IPCC Code Red for Humanity"

These reports are kind of like the SparkNotes versions of that book you forgot to read for class that one time. The IPCC takes thousands of peer-reviewed research articles and condenses them into detailed summaries. Imagine, the ultimate book report. Written by scientists.

These and a few other reports represent some of the most comprehensive and collaborative international science ever. And when these reports have been picked up by the media, they've helped launch waves of awareness and activism across the world.

So, you've got the UNEP, the IPCC subgroup, and finally: our last acronym, with the highest Scrabble score, goes to the UNFCCC. While the IPCC is focused on compiling and reporting knowledge about climate science, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is about the other side of the coin: how we put that knowledge into action as an international community.

It's essentially a treaty, signed in 1992 by 154 countries, to try and combat, quote, "dangerous human interference in the climate system." AKA: what's been happening since we started burning fossil fuels during the Industrial Revolution.

Every year, members of the signing countries meet for a Conference of the Parties, or COP. Which... is another acronym. Sorry I betrayed you like that.

4:43

Photos of COP meetings in Paris, France

Anyway! The COP meets to discuss progress and new approaches to tackling climate change. For instance, in 2015, the COP meeting in Paris resulted in the Paris Agreement, which set a long-term goal to reduce climate warming to well below two degrees Celsius — ideally, 1.5 degrees. We'll come back to this agreement in a minute.

For now, though, there's your list! The UNEP, the IPCC, and the UNFCCC. With so many committees and resolutions, it really seems like we should have climate change in the bag.

But you know, humans aren't always the best at sticking to big plans. Like, don't even ask me about the running goals I set last New Year's. Similarly, these international agreements have been a mixed bag. Sometimes, nations lace up their running shoes, and sometimes, they take a nap.

5:35

Photo from 1997 Climate change conference, US Vice President Al Gore is seen standing; photo of representatives from different countries at Kyoto Protocol conference listening via headsets; aerial clip of fast-moving traffic in Beijing, China

For example, one of the first major agreements to emerge from the Conference of the Parties was the Kyoto Protocol in 1997, adopted at a meeting in… you guessed it… Kyoto, Japan.

Countries that signed up to the Kyoto Protocol were legally committed to reducing greenhouse gas emissions by a set amount within specific time frames. If they didn't make their targets, they could be penalized by international courts.

Which seemed like a good motivator! Except, the Kyoto Protocol has largely been considered a failure. Much like my 5K training.

The targets within the agreement were not legally binding for developing countries, so fast-growing, industrial economies like China and India had no legal obligation. That decision had ripple effects.

The biggest greenhouse gas emitter in the world at the time — the United States — disagreed with that exclusion, so effectively decided not to participate in the Kyoto Protocol at all.

Without the U.S. on board, many people questioned the usefulness of the Protocol. And at the end of the commitment period, greenhouse gas emissions were higher than ever. So, a little under 20 years later, countries returned to the starting line to try again.

6:49

Photo of representatives holding hands at Paris Agreement meeting; animation of a wind farm

This time, the COP drafted the Paris Agreement, with the goal to reduce climate warming to well below two degrees Celsius. And the UNFCCC had learned from their mistakes the first time around! While the Kyoto Protocol had been legally binding, the Paris Agreement was voluntary.

The idea was that each country would draft a plan outlining how they would reduce emissions. Then, theoretically, peer pressure from other members would help everyone stick to those commitments. It would be like if I joined a running group who helped me stick to my routine by sticking to theirs.

The Paris Agreement also encouraged nations to commit a total of 100 billion dollars a year to the Green Climate Fund, as a way for wealthier countries to fund things like decarbonization in lower-income countries.

This was a huge step forward and a big shift in climate policy! It was a switch from strict, legal rule-setting, to a more collaborative process. But the Green Climate Fund is where this more flexible policy falls down.

Without clear ways to report and enforce how much money countries are contributing, not all the expected money made it into the piggy bank.

8:00

Animation of Scrooge McDuck jumping into piles of gold coins; clip of friends eating dinner; black and white photo of UNEP Conference

For instance, only about 83 billion of the 100 billion dollars was raised in 2020. To be fair, 83 billion dollars is still one huge piggy bank.

You could probably live in that thing. Or me, pay off my student loans. I am talking Scrooge McDuck, swimming in gold coins levels of magnitude here. But a 17-billion-dollar difference is also a world-changing gap.

Now, it might seem like the solution to this is obvious: just make the Paris Agreement more strict, right? I mean, even voluntary accountability groups have penalties.

Say you and your friends all agree to not check your phones while you're out to dinner. If someone does, they definitely have to buy dessert. But there's some tension there.

In 1972, the Stockholm Declaration — the one from the UNEP that kickstarted international action for the environment — included the principle that every nation has the right to govern itself. Except, any climate policy that's effective on the international stage will mean countries submitting to some kind of overarching governance. But no one is actually required to do that.

9:13

M Jackson appears on screen; graphic logo of the Earth with the text "Life On Earth"

So, you see...it gets messy. This idea of national sovereignty — or the right of countries to govern themselves — was brought up when countries objected to the legally-binding Kyoto Protocol, and some of the more strict commitments proposed for the Paris Agreement.

So, now, we have the Paris Agreement's more flexible targets. But will that work for the long term? Stay tuned for the next season of "Life on Earth."

Another problem that remains to be solved is the inequality between countries. Historically, countries with weaker economies have smaller voices in international discussions. Which is especially problematic since they're the ones who tend to feel the worst impacts of climate change.

And when it comes to making plans for the future, they often don't get the attention or the action they need. But there is one international policy that gets a gold star. Take it away, Thought Bubble.

10:07

Cartoon image of front page of newspaper headlining "Ozone Hole is Growing, the Heat is on!"; animations of diverse panels at UNEP meetings, one speaker states "Each nation must do their part!", another states "The ozone is healing itself!"; graphic of a page in the Montreal Protocol titled Kigali Amendment, listing "Regulated Substances"

From the 1980s through at least the early 2000s, everyone used to talk about the infamous hole in the ozone, a protective layer of the Earth's atmosphere. And it was a big deal!

But now... you never hear about it. And that's partly thanks to the success of the Montreal Protocol! It's an international treaty enacted by the UNEP in 1987, in the era of big hair and acid-washed jean jackets.

And to date, it's the only international agreement that's been ratified by every one of the 198 UN member states. But it's not a climate agreement. It was introduced to limit and phase out the production of chemicals that attack the ozone layer, called CFCs, or for the Scrabble win: chlorofluorocarbons.

And it has a lot going for it. It has strict, legally-binding targets for each nation, and annual meetings that can change those targets as needed. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, countries were also willing to sign up for it!

And now, the hole in the ozone layer is healing itself! These days, the protocol's scope has expanded into the climate realm with the Kigali Amendment in 2016.

It adds a group of chemicals called hydrofluorocarbons, or HFCs, to the list of regulated substances. HFCs don't attack the ozone layer, but they are super strong greenhouse gases used in things like air-conditioners.

11:28

Photos of President of Ukraine speaking at COP meeting, young activist Greta Thunberg at a conference, the public protesting; video credits displayed

And if the Kigali Amendment is effective, experts suggest that by the end of the century, we can prevent the average global temperature from going up a full half degree Celsius. Thanks, Thought Bubble!

The Montreal Protocol is an example of how we could get international climate policy right. And the Kigali Amendment goes to show how climate change can be integrated into existing policies.

If you already have a way of doing something that works, it's a lot easier just to expand that approach, than to invent a whole new set of rules and processes. Which makes me think: Maybe I should combine my running schedule with my daily coffee run...

Ultimately, climate policy is a pretty young form of governance, so we're still trying to work out the best way to do it. And only time will tell which strategies will be the most effective.

Smaller countries, activists, and the public will also continue to have a bigger and bigger role in these conversations, as more seats are made available at the table.

Whatever we do, though, we've got our work cut out for us. Because even beyond passing laws, we'll need to find an approach that helps overcome the cultural, political, and economic challenges faced by each and every nation on Earth.

MOTNT - more on that next time. I think we're gonna need more Scrabble letters!

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