Columbians Taking Initiative

Using the Tools of Business to Inform Environmental Policy

By Elisha Sessions

At a conference on climate change in Montreal this month, the United Nations will be considering a sweeping proposal generated by Columbia business students and faculty to financially reward countries that protect their rainforests.

If adopted, the new provision would extend the Kyoto protocols—the set of agreements aimed at, among other things, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by industrial societies—to developing nations.

Under Kyoto, polluters who create too much carbon dioxide are penalized, while those who keep their inventories low receive credits. The protocol would provide a way for developed countries to purchase credits from developing nations to meet their emissions reduction targets.

Kevin Conrad, a 2005 business school graduate who was raised on the island of New Guinea, home of the world's third largest rainforest area, sought out Heal to super- vise the final project for his Executive MBA. Conrad worked with Heal and fellow classmates to examine whether money from the Kyoto agreements could equal Papua New Guinea's logging revenue. Conrad's business plan concluded that the carbon credits the nation could receive as a result of slowing deforestation would indeed outstrip the economic benefits of destroying its forests—provided the rules were changed to allow credits for this purpose.

With this economic data in hand, Conrad and Heal enlisted Papua New Guinea's support to start a coalition encompassing the Amazon, Indonesian, New Guinea, and other rainforest countries. The group is lobbying to reform how the Kyoto protocols deal with deforestation. The prime minister of Papua New Guinea, Michael Somare, announced at the conference his intention during his visit to Columbia in May of this year to work with Heal to reform the protocols.

The Record's cooperative agreement was one of the deals that helped convince the Papua New Guinea prime minister of the viability of Conrad’s concept.

“By writing up our papers and making the Kyoto protocol workable, we’re really leading the way in drawing together the knowledge of what we've been learning in the classroom and apply it to the issues around us,” said Keith, a first-year at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). “I’m an aspiring international level athlete and I’ve seen how the rules have changed and the economics of the sport have changed; it’s really a fascinating story.”

The Record’s cooperation came to fruition last November when Keith and his fellow students, Don Blakeney and Hillary Peck, won the initiative. The Record provided the students with $20,000 in seed funding to start an organization called the Initiative for Rainforest Action. Since then, the group has raised $200,000 and secured commitments from 20 countries, including Papua New Guinea, Canada, and the United States, to develop a coalition of rainforest nations which will promote the protocol as a way to protect the forests.

The partnership included providing The Record with a reporter for the school year and publishing the students’ articles in the paper. The students also worked with The Record's editorial staff to publish their research, which focused on the economic impact of deforestation and the role of the Kyoto protocol in funding forest conservation. The students were able to use The Record’s platform to reach a wider audience and raise awareness about the importance of the issue.

The partnership with The Record was a key factor in the success of the Initiative for Rainforest Action. The students were able to use The Record’s resources to conduct research, write articles, and engage with a diverse audience. The partnership demonstrated the power of collaboration between academia and media to create meaningful change.

“Working with The Record was a great experience,” said Blakeney. “It was a unique opportunity to see how a newspaper operates and to use our research to inform the public about an important issue.”

The Initiative for Rainforest Action is continuing its work to promote the protocol as a way to protect the world’s rainforests. The students are now focused on raising awareness about the issue and encouraging governments to take action to protect the forests.

Stepping Out: Grad Students Treat City as Lab for Testing Ideas

The mansion that borders the corner of 160th St. and Edgecombe Ave would have been just another mysterious fixture in the City’s landscape had Columbia student Amy Keith not done a little research before setting out last Friday on a walking tour with some of her fellow students. Keith, a first-year at Columbia University, is a co-founder of the Columbia Initiative for Rainforest Action (SIPA), an inaugural member of the Remaking Rainforest Coalition (RRC), a group that aims to develop a coalition of rainforest nations which will promote the protocol as a way to protect the forests.

Keith and her classmates, Don Blakeney and Hillary Peck, are among a group of Columbia students who are working to develop an organization called the Initiative for Rainforest Action. The organization, which is based at SIPA, is an inaugural member of the Remaking Rainforest Coalition (RRC), a group that aims to develop a coalition of rainforest nations which will promote the protocol as a way to protect the forests.

Keith, Blakeney, and Peck were part of a group of students who won the opportunity to develop the initiative during an event at the School of International and Public Affairs. The students had to write essays about their ideas for the initiative, and the group that won the opportunity was the one that came up with the most compelling idea.

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