



## Young alumni report back from December's UN climate change talks

In November, Raili Lakanen, Artsci'09, and Thea Whitman, Artsci'08, went to Cancun, Mexico, in November for the United Nations Climate Change Conference. They were part of the Canadian Youth Delegation at the conference. This was Raili's first time as a delegate, and Thea's third.

*Raili:* As a first-time member of the Canadian Youth Delegation, I was honoured to work with the diverse group of young people in Cancun. We arrived ready to lobby the Canadian government delegation and poised to report back to Canadians. Though a glitch in the accreditation process resulted in a delay of our badges, we were able to work from our hostel for the first few days. Fortunately, several members of our delegation – Thea included – were in the conference with separate accreditation and provided updates at our evening meetings.

Throughout the conference, we attended meetings and civil society briefings with the Canadian delegation. With respect to the government's position, a UN official revealed during a press conference that Canada, Japan and Russia were unsupportive of a second-term commitment period under the Kyoto Protocol. Indeed, in our meetings, Canada's lead negotiator kept referring to the government's commitment to the Copenhagen Accord, which he called "ambitious". Contrary to that statement, scientific findings have shown that even if reductions targets ("pledges") under the Copenhagen Accord were met, they would not be great enough to keep average global temperature rise under 2 degrees Celsius, the upper limit of warming considered acceptable by most nations. This disparity between targets and necessary reductions has been labelled "the Gigatonne Gap" and will surely be further discussed in the lead-up to COP 17 in Durban, South Africa in 2011.

Canada picked up the most Fossil of the Day awards, including the final day's Colossal Fossil (for the fourth year in a row!) According to international environmental groups, Canada is obstructive in the process of negotiating a climate deal and has failed to implement domestic policy. As a young Canadian, it is disheartening to see our country portrayed in such a negative light at the international level – and worse to see our country behaving badly on the world stage – especially since we can do better. As an Arctic nation, Canada has much at stake when it comes to climate change, as well as a moral obligation to the international community. Our country has the capacity to become a leader in developing greener technologies, innovative community-based solutions and strong climate policy. Will we do it? If the young people we worked with in Cancun are any indication, we're already on our way.

*Raili Lakanen, Artsci'09, is pursuing a Master's degree in Environmental Planning at U of T. Her current SSHRC-funded research project examines the role of social capital in the development and implementation of local sustainability plans.*




*Thea:* As I travelled to this year's UN climate change negotiations with the team of 28 young Canadians from across the country who had fundraised to get to Cancún for the two-week conference, I didn't know what to expect. While last year's disappointments in Copenhagen seemed to have dampened enthusiasm for climate action and faith in the UN process, the lost time meant that there was even more urgency to co-ordinate a strong international effort to fight climate change. Furthermore, while undeniably beautiful, Cancún was a challenging choice as the location for a conference dealing with issues so deeply touched by the disparities between nations that are exemplified by the city's tourist industry. While we stayed in a youth hostel downtown, most negotiators and civil society participants stayed in all-inclusive beachfront hotel resorts, normally devoted to providing extravagant excesses for vacationers and students on spring break, who are kept blissfully separate from any authentic Mexican culture in the hotels out on the "hotel strip."

As it turned out, the "Cancun Agreements" could be classified as a mitigated success. With the first commitment period for the Kyoto Protocol ending in 2012, we need an agreement in place as soon as possible to set out the next round of greenhouse gas reduction targets for developed countries – this time, including the US – and to establish what actions developing countries will take. While this was not achieved, the Kyoto Protocol is still alive, despite Japan's open rejection of a second commitment period. As well, progress was made on providing financing to developing countries for adaptation and mitigation, enabling the transfer of clean technology between countries, and reducing emissions from deforestation globally.

Most importantly, though, trust between nations and in the UN process was re-established, thanks to inspiring work led by Mexico to bring countries together in an open process to build consensus (although Bolivia sees the Cancun Agreements as insufficient and opposed them). If Bolivia had succeeded in taking down the process, blocking any agreement coming out of Cancún, it is certain that the UN process would have taken a very hard hit – maybe even a fatal one. As the sole process that is inclusive of almost all countries in the world, including those which will be hit the hardest by climate change, but are least responsible for causing it, it is essential that the UN climate change negotiations be sustained and legitimized.

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