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SAVING THE WORLD WITH INFLATABLE TREES  
  
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ABSTRACT  
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a climate change conference? According to TFG executive director Jeff Metcalfe,  
tropical deforestation is "a huge but less recognized source of greenhouse gas  
emissions. ... Deforestation is just part of the negotiations, but when that is  
on the front page, attention is drawn to fighting deforestation as a means of  
reducing climate change." The cutting down and burning of tropical forests for  
warmth and cooking amounts to about 20 percent of global emissions while at the  
same time reducing the number of trees that would otherwise turn that carbon  
dioxide into oxygen. "We have a two-fold mission," said Metcalfe, a Michigan  
native who works as a marketing consultant to pay the bills. "Saving tropical  
forests is priority number one, and in doing so, we're also fighting climate  
change."  
  
  
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borders? "They house more than half of the Earth's species, so they're valuable  
in that respect," said Metcalfe. "But the tropical forests are also more  
threatened because there is a huge demand for products that involve clearing  
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FULL TEXT  
  
  
S.B.'s Tropical Forest Group Heats Up UN Climate Change Talks  
  
  
In the past decade, human-caused global warming has gone from a hotiy debated  
theory to a widely accepted, scientifically validated truth. Simultaneously,  
many of the world's countries have banded together under the United Nations  
Framework Convention on Climate Change and in various climate-related treaties  
to fight back, cut greenhouse gases, and hopefully cool the heat before more  
damage is done.  
  
  
The most expansive of these treaties, the Kyoto Protocol-which legally committed  
countries to reaching benchmarks, placed the bigger burden on developed  
countries, and established a viable emissions trading market-is set to expire in  
2012. To ensure the protocol's accomplishments do not melt five years from now  
like the icebergs it's trying to save, the United Nations and the nearly 200  
countries who signed on are scrambling to establish a sequel to Kyoto. That mad  
rush will reach its peak next week on the Indonesian island of Bali, where the  
United Nations Climate Change Conference (UNCCC) is going down for two weeks  
starting on December 3.  
  
  
But as the global media turn their cameras toward Bali next week to watch the  
planet's leading politicians try to save the world, the visuals most likely to  
grace televisions screens from Jakarta to Johannesburg won't be of gray-suited  
diplomats negotiating in a map-filled room over a paper-strewn conference table.  
Rather, the shots you'll probably see plastered across the New York Times and on  
CNN will be of giant inflatable trees, posted with UN permission just outside  
the convention to symbolize the progress of the talks through their changing  
tones and shapes. And these soon-to-be-famous trees-which will stand 20-feet  
tall when talks are going well for the environment but will sprout inflatable  
flames if they go sour-have roots in Santa Barbara.  
  
  
Envisioned, sponsored, and coordinated by the Tropical Forest Group (TFG)-a  
nonprofit headquartered in the S.B. foothills that's dedicated to fighting  
deforestation - and created by Summer Solstice Parade artist Pali-X-Mano, these  
trees are just part of the publicity package being unveiled in Bali. The  
two-year-old TFG-which was launched by a team of scientists, lawyers, and  
activists led by environmental consultant John-O Niles in time to produce  
similar media stunts during the 2005 UNCCC in Montreal-is also hosting Balinese  
dancers during the conference's main negotiation day, supporting a team of  
bloggers from Yale University who'll report live on the talks, and providing  
technical support inside the talks for countries who need the help. Other Santa  
Barbara companies lending a hand include Boxtales, which provided theatrical  
visioning, Solforce, which is donating solar panels to power the trees, and  
Powell Skateboards, which is giving manpower and supplies as well.  
  
  
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Although the nonprofit, which formally incorporated as a 501(c)(3) this year,  
will be making the biggest waves in Bali, they're also quietly supporting  
tropical forest conservation work around the world. "What we look for are  
projects that are ideally protecting areas from becoming deforested," Metcalfe  
said. "If they are reforesting projects, we make sure they're using indigenous  
species. But rather than getting into a country and starting something new, we  
look for projects that are already doing well and meeting certain success  
criteria." The group lends a special hand to forests in conflict regions, where  
governments and other nonprofits are typically busy dealing with more pressing  
humanitarian concerns.  
  
  
Domestically, TFG is raising awareness that the American government-which is one  
of the few developed nations to have backed out of Kyoto-is continually trying  
to cut back its financial commitment to saving such forests. Meanwhile, the rest  
of the world is realizing, thanks to a November report from the  
Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, that "saving tropical forests is one  
of the fastest, cheapest, smartest, and most equitable ways to fight climate  
change," explained Niles, a TFG cofounder.  
  
  
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It's facts like this that Metcalfe, Niles, and the rest of TFG hope will become  
widespread wisdom due to their involvement in the December talks in Bah. And  
until then, be on the lookout for inflatable trees on your TV screen.  
  
SIDEBAR  
  
  
Members of the Santa Barbara-based Tropical Forest Group (pictured here at City  
College) are heading to the UN Climate Change Conference in Bali this week.  
They're bringing Pali-X-Mano's inflatable trees, which will symbolize the  
conference's environmental progress and are likely to hit TV screens worldwide.