

reflections

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It was 1987. The Soviet Union launched the Mir Space Station, the world population reached five billion, Oscar Arias Sanchez won the Nobel Peace Prize and Paul Simon's 'Graceland' was named record of the year. But perhaps the key event occurred in Canada, when the world's nations agreed to the Montreal Protocol to repair and protect the Earth's protective ozone layer.

The treaty is perhaps the single most successful international environmental agreement ever made. It generates science and deploys funds to assist developing countries to phase out ozone damaging chemicals, like chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and halons. But its impact stretches beyond safeguarding public health from excessive ultra violet rays from the sun.

It is now clear that - as ozone depleting substances are also often powerful greenhouse gases - the treaty has also spared the planet and its people much global warming. Above all, it is a symbol of how, when faced with a serious international threat, nations can set aside differences and make common cause under the United Nations.

This edition of Our Planet celebrates the Protocol's 20th anniversary and the past, present - and also perhaps future - achievements of those who have made it a success. Future because - though 95 per cent of the substances it controls have been phased out - the remaining five per cent may prove troublesome. Getting rid of them is necessary for the ozone layer's full recovery.

Besides, some ozone depleting chemicals are also being increasingly employed in ways that fall outside the treaty's provision. An example is methyl bromide being used not as a controlled pesticide but as a currently uncontrolled fumigant on wooden pallets in international shipments.

UNEP's involvement in the issue began in 1977 following rising disquiet over links between CFCs and damage to the Earth's protective ozone layer. The big catalyst for action came when the British Antarctic Survey found an ozone hole over Antarctica in 1985. Remarkably, governments acted swiftly to agree on the treaty once the science was accepted. Just as important, industry - once provided with incontrovertible evidence- also moved fast to provide and use alternatives.



The Multilateral Fund - which has provided over \$1.3 billion in funding for developing country phase outs - is another key to success. This summer China shut down five plants, putting it two and a half years ahead of the developing countries' 2010 deadline for phasing out CFCs and halons.

A big challenge, as governments celebrate in Montreal in September, is how the treaty can contribute even more to combating climate change. Scientists from the Netherlands and the United States estimate that, by 2010, phasing out CFCs and other ozone depleting substances will save the equivalent of eleven gigatonnes of carbon dioxide a year. This compares to a cut of just one gigatonne over 1990 levels mandated under the Kyoto Protocol, or two gigatonnes from what the 2010 levels would be if emissions has been allowed to grow unchecked.

It could, they add, contribute even more, since some of the alternative chemicals to CFCs, such as HCFCs and HFCs, also have climate change impacts. They suggest that a combination of accelerated phase-out, the introduction of more climate-friendly products and relatively small changes in industrial practices could cut the equivalent of something over another gigatonne of carbon dioxide.

So the story of the Montreal Protocol has not yet reached its final chapter. There is much more to do and wider benefits to be harvested. But it has already achieved much to celebrate, putting the ozone layer on the road to recovery. Experts calculate that - without the decisions taken 20 years ago - atmospheric levels of ozone depleting substances would have increased tenfold by 2050, leading to up to 20 million more cases of skin cancer and 130 million more cases of eye cataracts, not to speak of damage to human immune systems, wildlife and agriculture. Its continued success must be assured.

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Cover photo © Franck Boston/istockphoto. The 20-year operation to preserve the ozone layer, the planet's protection from harmful ultraviolet radiation, is the theme for this issue of Our Planet. Aerosol sprays epitomize in many people's minds the campaign launched under the Montreal Protocol to phase out ozone-depleting gases. With the Montreal Protocol's success comes the realization that global environmental problems can be solved by global commitment. As our authors point out, this includes climate change, the pre-eminent challenge of our time.