

Transnational Temps

presents



terrannode.org/ecoscope

EcoScope is a telematic forum concerning environmental issues. It is one of a series of projects by the international art collective **Transnational Temps** involving the environment, public participation, and tactical media.

It stands to reason that solutions to the various contemporary ecological crises are more likely to emerge when the public is both well informed and practiced in articulating ideas about the environment. So **EcoScope** is designed to blend news and information with discussion. Its structure indicates the importance of participation in any meaningful solutions that can be imagined.

Although **EcoScope** resembles some existing graphical chat software, what separates it from others is the context it provides. **EcoScope** leverages scientific visualization, time-lapse satellite photography, landscape photography, and environmental journalism to provide a framework for conversation and discovery.

Since its formation in 2001, **Transnational Temps** has developed diverse media art

relating to the environment, extinction, public awareness, and faith in technological progress. Members of **Transnational Temps** are artists without borders, weaving together art, telecommunications, and activism.

Earth Art for the 21st Century

Making art that addresses the contemporary environmental situation is challenging. Attempts to bridge art and activism often fall short. Vague abstraction tends to arouse suspicion among activists, while connoisseurs find fault with almost any work that assumes a didactic or informative tone.

Despite theoretical pronouncements by Theodor Adorno, among others, that the merger of art and social purpose is doomed to failure, **Transnational Temps** insists that environmental sustainability and related subjects are not beyond the scope of aesthetic experience. Art is ever-changing, and the warming world of the 21st century needs a vigorous multi-disciplinary movement to generate a new ecological common sense.

While most cultural and media institutions continue to neglect the deterioration of the environment, **Transnational Temps** has organized resistance against this flight from ecology. Like Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty, which disappeared beneath the surface of the Great Salt Lake for thirty years, Earth Art has re-emerged in the new millennium.

Transnational Temps exists because environmental sustainability now requires human cooperation more than ever before. The lessons of environmental science are not just for school children. A hopeful future for the world's environment in the decades to come will depend on making consciousness about environmental problems far more widespread. The technical means of educating and informing people about global conditions have never been more abundant.

But efforts to advance international cooperation continue to be overshadowed by the commercial exploitation of the media. Myriad corporations drive a spectacular agenda that encourages distraction rather than action.

Standing in the way of a transformation of consciousness are various industries and a commodity culture whose priorities conflict with the best interests of life on Earth. The failure of the prevailing economic system to account for the value of the environment has led to a situation in which the planet is being destroyed so that short-term profits can be maintained. This is insanity!

Transnational Temps operates, therefore, at the crossroads of inter-related crises. "Art at its most significant," said Marshall McLuhan, "is a Distant Early Warning System that can always be relied on to tell the old culture what is beginning to happen to it." One of the artist's greatest challenges is finding ways to sound an alarm that people don't necessarily want to hear it. Crisis forms a disturbing basis for aesthetic experience, especially when it's personal. Because ultimately the deterioration of the physical world is not someone else's problem, it is a theme that can be overwhelming if it is not offset by humor, inspiration, curiosity, and hope. How best to open public dialogue about such matters? It may help to begin somewhere.

Somewhat arbitrarily, **Transnational Temps** employs the postcard as a means to invite people to participate. Users of **EcoScope** can easily produce electronic postcards to

invite others to visit the site. Making printed postcards is also an option. Each postcard is, in effect, a snapshot of the present state of the discussion. So the postcards give a reliable indication of what to expect when visiting **EcoScope**. The cards are also an outlet for creative expression.

Extreme Home Entertainment Systems

EcoScope inaugurates a series of **Extreme Home Entertainment Systems** which abandon the superficial "realism" of video gaming in favor of the topical realism of extreme weather. **Extreme Home Entertainment Systems** embrace play, but they reject the passive configuration of the conventional Home Entertainment System. Active engagement cannot mean extreme boredom. **Transnational Temps** aims to address critical social issues without boring people or overwhelming them with depressing statistics.

If the familiar commerciality and escapism of interactive media products establish certain expectations among audiences, such as that online experiences must be entertaining, so be it. **EcoScope** entertains. Despite the seriousness of the proposed subject matter, **EcoScope** injects a dose of fun by letting users adopt graphical avatars such as monkeys, dolphins, and tigers; channel surf from Mount Kilimanjaro to the tropics; or organize a sit-in on the edge of a stratospheric ozone hole.

Unlike the highly individualistic feats of extreme sports, **Extreme Home Entertainment Systems** explore the potential of collaboration. In the interactive, online media of **EcoScope**, spectators are challenged to communicate. The coercive control offered by typical corporate media offerings may lead to more predictable results, but young people, especially, are eager to find ways to subvert and circumvent this dull regularity. Web 2.0 participation is rendering "reality television" obsolete for a generation that prefers to do more than just watch and listen.

Extreme Home Entertainment Systems differ from games in that there are no artificial victories to be found. In many respects, the goals are undefined. **EcoScope** advances a writerly textual condition in which participants provide most of the site's content. This openness is offset by a framework that is by turns documentary and journalistic. As both avatars and scenery draw attention to a physical world at risk, the user-directed discourse is tilted subtly towards analysis rather than fantasy. The entertainment system is thereby reconceived as a mechanism for collaborative resistance, a tool for escaping the virtualization of the real.

Superpower vs. Indifference

EcoScope is the the latest in a series of media art projects begun in 2001. Inspired by New York Times correspondent Patrick Tyler's observation that there remain two superpowers – the United States and world public opinion – **Transnational Temps** began to focus attention on public opinions about the environment. Leveraging workshops, residencies, and exhibitions, the collective has developed both a body of recordings, and strategies to present and distribute them. From events in Portugal, Uruguay, Greece, and the United States, to **Terranode 2005** in France, and **Aquanode 2006** in Turkey, the collective has recorded many statements and incorporated them into both installations and online media. These activities have brought digital media art into the landscape and into the public sphere. Because each event has incorporated site-

specific nuances, topics have varied from place to place. Rather than conducting interviews, people have been asked to discuss what, if anything, concerns them about the environment. The voice recordings can be heard via streaming media at **Terranode Radio** (radio.terrancode.org).

EcoScope continues this interest in the superpower of public opinion, and like **Terranode** and **Aquanode** it encourages people to express their views about the environment. To advance the general project of representing global attitudes toward the environment, **EcoScope** also maintains a public archive of all the discussions that occur.

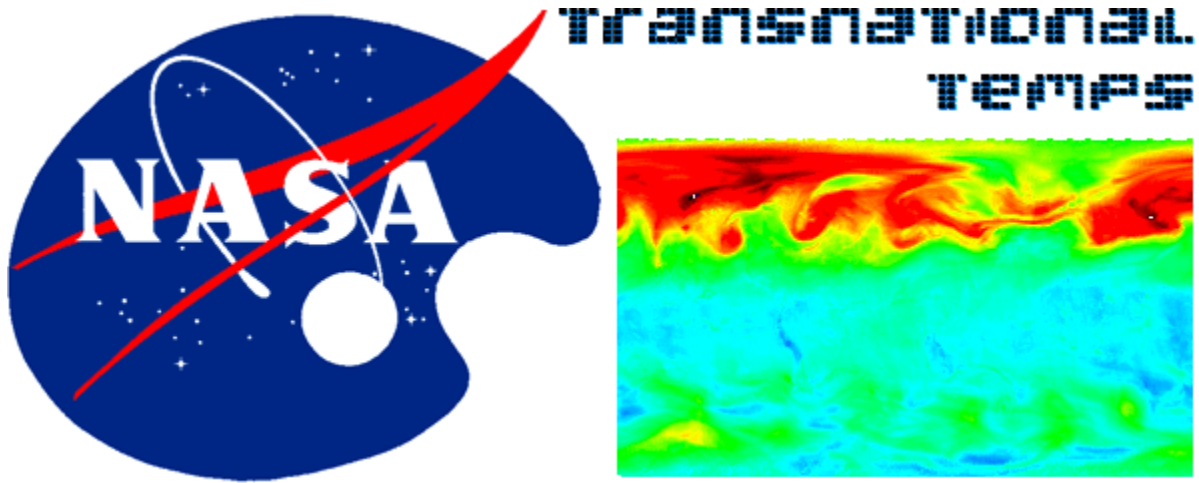
In some respects **EcoScope** resembles an open microphone because anyone can use the platform to say anything about anything, anonymously. Experience with similarly open online interfaces suggests, however, that a compelling interactive context will lead many people to make thoughtful contributions. Thematic channels were therefore designed to suggest relevant topics for analysis and debate.

Deforestation Channel

In the **Deforestation Channel** the dynamic background imagery represents successive levels of deforestation in Bolivia from 1984 to 2004, as measured by NASA satellites. The time-lapse visualization reveals the limitations of casually observing environmental changes. The ease with which humans grow accustomed to changes, like the disappearance of forests, underscores the value of photographs and databases as aids to memory. But, then, how well can a person know a forest from seeing aerial photographs?

The metaphor of the “scope” suggests an instrument that will enhance vision. But a satellite-assisted way of seeing forests is no substitute for knowing a forest by being in it, or living near it.

Most citizens of the advanced industrialized nations, lacking direct sensory experience, have lost contact with both flora and fauna in a prolonged estrangement from nature. In this age of genetic engineering, it's increasingly difficult even to differentiate natural and synthetic. For most people, direct experiences of nature and wildlife are as brief as they are limited. Even the word "nature" evokes little more than nostalgia for unexplored land: a wilderness free of the centuries of human domination and remodeling. Contact with other forms of life has been reduced to a mediated experience, an optical re-run, a demographically targeted event sandwiched between commercial messages.



The **Deforestation Channel** and the **Ozone Channel** make use of scientific data from satellites.

Fix News Channel

Since global warming and other atmospheric conditions, such as acid rain, are difficult to perceive, journalism could do a lot to direct attention to critical problems. Yet too often journalism on environmental affairs in the mainstream media has lacked persistence and urgency. In place of investigative reporting, there has been a rise of ultra-sensationalistic news programming. Spotty environmental news coverage has proven ineffective in mobilizing behavioral and policy changes equal to the challenge of global warming.

At the same time, the Internet has made access to environmentally relevant news easier. The **Fix News Channel** brings together a wide variety of sources, offering a hyper-linked headline for each article. It connects visitors to resources they can use to educate themselves about climate change, environmental policies, endangered species, renewable energy, protests, and scientific research. Moreover, the **Fix News Channel** reflects current events and gives a timely and adaptive quality to **EcoScope**. While it is no match for the production qualities of real television newscasts, it does sketch an up-to-date alternative newscast in which environmental news is always the lead story.



The **Fix News Channel**: it is possible to add news items to the **Fix News** database and to comment on articles using the **Fix News Wiki**.

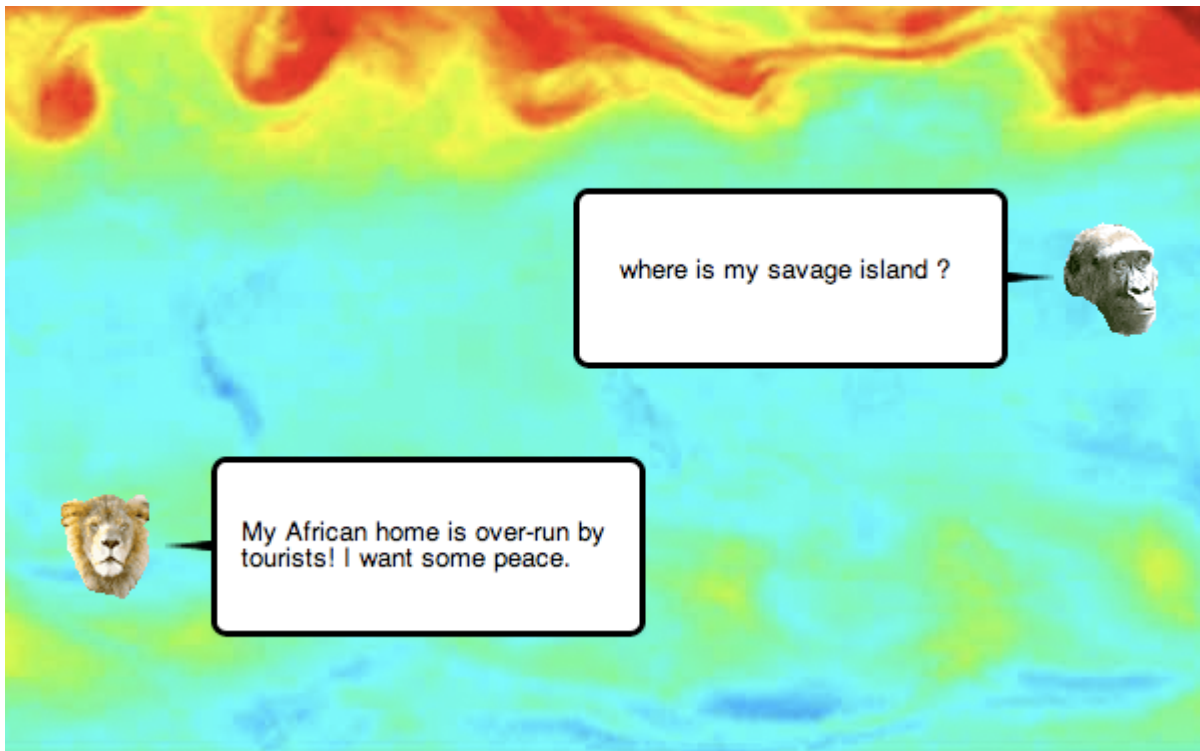
Ozone Channel

For decades the scientific community has been publishing findings on a variety of troublesome trends, such as global warming, ozone holes, rising sea levels, deforestation, extinction, and receding glaciers. Some important actions have resulted, such as the Montreal Protocol, an international ban on ozone-damaging chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs).

Each day **EcoScope** automatically produces maps using new ozone data so that discussions in the **Ozone Channel** can be superimposed over the most current visualization of ozone levels in the atmosphere. Artistic forays like this into scientific visualization can play a role in communicating research findings. The ozone images are a reminder of the vulnerability of the Earth's atmosphere to human activities.

Unfortunately when scientists sound a note of alarm, it does not necessarily translate into political action. Consequently, it has become increasingly important to bridge the gap between specialized knowledge and public awareness.

The **Ozone Channel** addresses a perceptual problem associated with issues like global warming and ozone depletion. Since direct experience of atmospheric ozone is impossible, scientists use advanced instruments and computer models to understand these matters. For non-scientists the problem of perception is compounded by the mediation – and outright distortion – of scientific findings. Public understanding of climatic conditions is influenced by many unscientific things, such as industry efforts to downplay the risks of fossil fuel dependency. This perceptual gap has been exploited for decades.



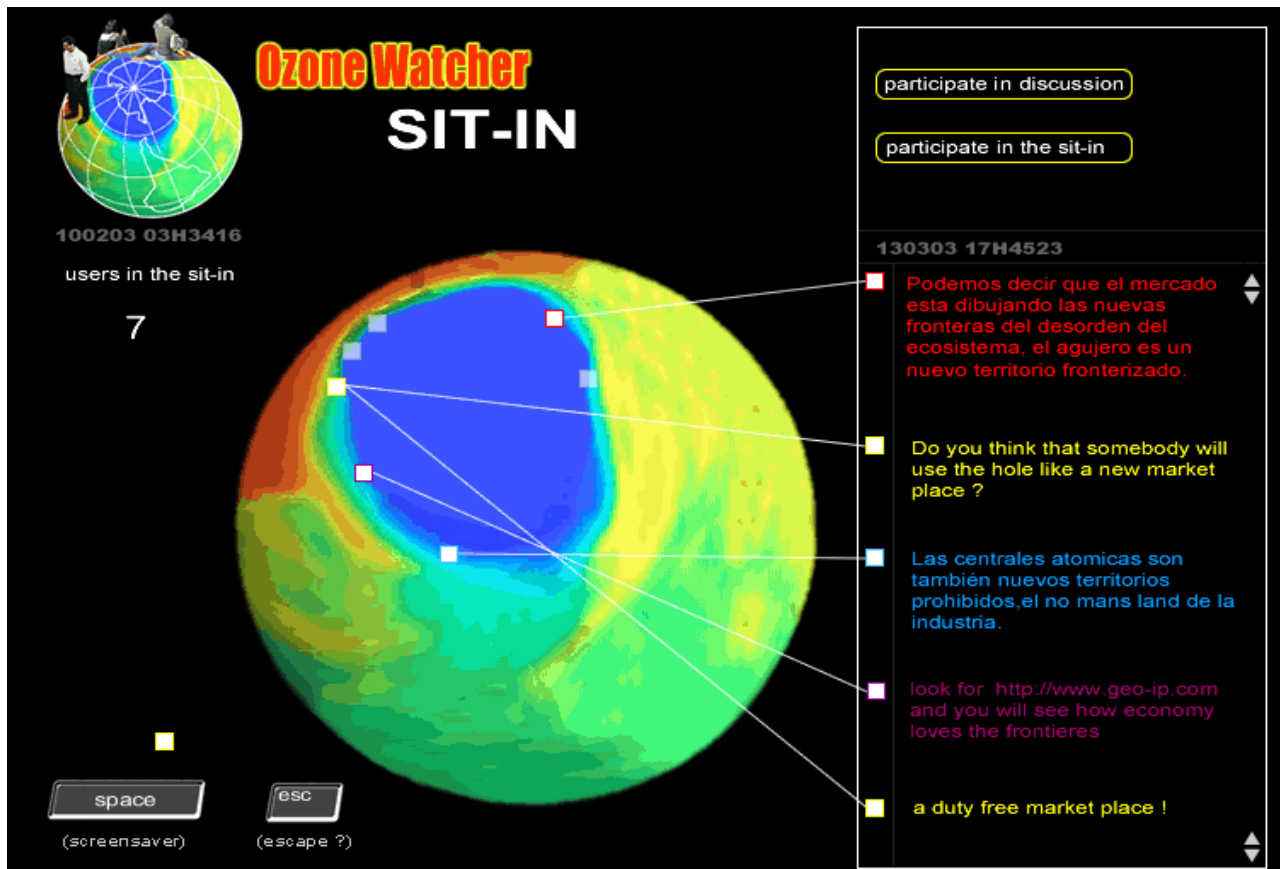
The **Ozone Channel**: blue and purple values indicative what is often called a 'hole' in the ozone layer.

Transnational Temps respects the work that concerned scientists are doing, but when repeated warnings by scientists about global warming prove largely ineffectual, a tactical media strategy is needed that will complement the conventional approach of the science community and inspire more passion in environmental affairs. Building enthusiasm for more sustainable lifestyles is a daunting task that may require new priorities and new approaches to communication. Without denigrating the value of research and statistics, it appears there are limits to the effectiveness of an endless parade of reports, conferences, and bulleted presentations. Filling databases is probably not the best ways to win the hearts and minds of non-scientists.

Paradoxically modern technology and science have enabled unprecedented access to everything from outer space to the subatomic space. From satellites to nano-sensors, perceptual prostheses have never been so sophisticated. And yet most citizens are far from taking part in the scientific explorations occurring beyond the fences and firewalls of research universities and private laboratories. While the privatization and commercialization of information have introduced a more closed scientific world, the passion of the 18th-century Encyclopedists to share knowledge has not been entirely extinguished. Climate science deserves credit for its openness. The **Ozone Channel** is made possible by free atmospheric ozone data from the U.S. National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service.

Even so, the Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert represented a fusion of science and creativity that has lapsed. It has been some time since interdisciplinary cultural work has been a part of the intellectual project of science. The reluctance of scientists to

grapple with the culture industry mirrors the lingering resistance to socially purposeful art. Yet social and environmental well-being can legitimate art and science alike. A public capable of imagining solutions to environmental problems would be more useful than science's pursuit of abstract objectivity, more beautiful than art's dedication to uselessness.



Occupy the technoscientific data-scapes! At the intersection of art, telecommunications, and science, **Transnational Temps** formulated this proposal in 2001 organize an ozone hole sit-in using data visualizations of the hole over the South Pole, courtesy of NASA's TOMS satellite.

New World Channel

There is a world to be gained. But sometimes it seems everything related to environmentalism is marked by division and dithering. The time to move decisively has already passed. Polar ice-shelves are slipping into the sea.

While efforts to date have failed to persuade politicians to act rationally to preserve the environment and slow climate change, developments like **Ecomedia** suggest that some of the discursive ice in the cultural sphere is beginning to break up. As troubles like drought, displacement, arable land, and extreme weather threaten to radically alter the human condition, it is becoming obvious that environmental issues must be addressed. **Transnational Temps** aims to stimulate discussion, break down stubborn boundaries, and develop new ways to share perceptions and act collectively.

Have you seen with your own eyes the emerging crisis of the environment? A new

“coalition of the willing” is needed – an alliance of the millions of people who see beyond the myopic priorities of SUV marketing. Join scientists, artists, activists, and ecologists. Participate in this new platform and lend insight to the ongoing discussions. Have a look through the **EcoScope**!

Transnational Temps EcoScope Team

EcoScope is the product of years of dialogue and design by members of **Transnational Temps**, especially **Fred Adam**, **Andy Deck** and **Verónica Perales**. **Andrea Parthemore** contributed to production. **Alex Spyropoulos** and **Stewart Ziff** contributed to discussions. Production coordinated in 2007 by **Andy Deck**.

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