

## CARBON OFFSETTING

*“Those of us in the rich world have become rich through cheap energy from fossil fuels that we have received over many decades. It is now increasingly apparent that emissions from burning fossil fuels are causing great damage, especially to the world's poorest people. There is a moral and Christian imperative to offset the damage we continue to cause... I commend the scheme\* to you”* (Sir John Houghton, former Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, and Britain's leading climatologist).

The concept is simple: we cause the emission of large amounts of carbon dioxide by behaviour that involves the combustion of fossil fuels (coal, gas and oil). However, by investing in projects that will reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emission by energy conservation (such as installation of insulation), sustainable energy generation (solar panels, etc.), or carbon capture (by planting trees), we can 'offset', i.e., reduce or eliminate, our net 'carbon footprint'.

In fact, Carbon Offsetting is a highly controversial subject that highlights the very real difficulties in trying to follow an environmentally friendly lifestyle, whilst enjoying the opportunities of modern Western existence. Critics make the following points:

- Offsetting just encourages people to maintain their existing carbon-gluttonous lifestyles with a clean conscience, according to Friends of the Earth. For example, “Sergey Brin, one of the founders of Google, has been using offsets to help reduce the carbon footprint he produced from flying his private Boeing 767.” [You have to laugh – otherwise you'd cry!].
- Large scale tree planting is fraught with difficulties. Firstly, some recent scientific studies indicate that tree planting in temperate regions has little effect on global warming (although there may be ecological and social benefits). Other problems may affect schemes in the tropics, to which this criticism does not apply. For example, “reforestation of Mount Elgon National Park in east Uganda, involves a tree-planting program guaranteed for 99 years and supposedly relies on close cooperation with the local population. The reality, said Jutta Kill, a climate campaigner at Fern, is that villagers living along the boundary of the park have been beaten and shot at, and their livestock has been confiscated by armed park rangers because of disputes over ownership of the land.” [These allegations have been denied.]
- Having set up a scheme, firms have a vested interest in directing their clients funds into it, even if more viable schemes present themselves.

I am not convinced by the rejectionist position advanced by some. *Certainly*, each of us must give top priority to bringing about a radical reduction in our emissions. However, few would criticise investing in domestic sustainable energy generation. So if our personal circumstances make that problematic or uneconomic, is it not desirable – indeed, ethically mandatory – that we invest in such emissions reduction elsewhere?

Since the damage caused by air travel is thought to be several times as great as the production of the same amount of CO<sub>2</sub> at ground level, there is a strong case for 'triple offsetting' – paying three times the amount normally required in this case.

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**The Government is in the process of drawing up guidelines for good practice in offsetting, but in the mean time, I believe one of the best schemes is offered by PURE, the Clean Planet Trust ([www.puretrust.org.uk/](http://www.puretrust.org.uk/)).**

- They remain independent, selecting projects on merit;
- In accordance with the UK Government's interim recommendation, PURE uses donations to make an investment in the UN Clean Development Mechanism, under the Kyoto Protocol. This helps finance a real (UN Approved) emissions reduction project that guarantees that a certain reduction in emissions will occur in the developing world. [Such schemes don't have an unblemished record, but I think they are good and getting better.]
- European companies make such investments, because such contributions earn for them special 'carbon credits' called 'certified emissions reduction credits' (CERs). These CERs are basically 'licences to pollute', enabling companies to increase their emissions. Since there are limits on the number of CER's available, PURE's acquisition of some of them reduces the scope for carbon emission by European industry. Its procedure thus involves a 'double whammy' – *both* reducing actual emissions in developing countries *and* curtailing the scope for emissions in Europe.
- Two final benefits: these projects provide sustainable energy in poor countries, which is an attraction to the poverty campaigner; *and*, since costs are lower there, you get 'more bang (ie, more emissions reduction) for your bucks', which is a bonus for the thrifty minded!

Despite what I say above, I am concerned that schemes doing good work, but which cannot satisfy the strict criteria for the UN, may lose out as a result of the Government's laudable aim to regulate the offsetting industry. I am thinking of, for example, Newcastle City Council's programme, [www.carbonneutralnewcastle.com](http://www.carbonneutralnewcastle.com), which invests in emissions reduction programmes locally, and the international Christian environmental group, Climate Stewards, [www.climatestewards.org.uk](http://www.climatestewards.org.uk), which promotes tree planting in the tropics. I am planning to use both of them myself, for the second and third 'prongs' for triple offsetting any flights we cannot avoid.

**\*Note:** Sir John Houghton was actually commending Climate Stewards, but his point could apply to any good offsetting scheme.

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For further reading:

DEFRA has a good explanation of carbon offsetting at:  
<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/climatechange/uk/carbonoffset/index.htm>

New York Herald Tribune article discussing offsetting critically (although but I think PURE ticks all its boxes): Google, "Guilt-Free Pollution. Or Is It? By James Kanter"

Tree Planting: Google, "How trees might not be green in carbon offsetting debate".