



# CARBON OFFSETTING GUILT-FREE FLYING?

With websites offering to clear carbon consciences for a charge, offsetting seems to solve the problem of what to do about our love of flying. But if something looks too good to be true, it generally is.

By **Simon Birch** | Illustrations **Michael Driver/Folio Art**

**R**emember when flying off on your summer holidays used to just be fun? Now though, rather than getting that giddy rush of excitement as your plane finally takes off, you're more likely to be wracked with environmental guilt. More and more of us are now coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that if we're to save the world from climate meltdown we've got to curb our flying habits. The problem is that flying packs one huge, climate-busting punch. Despite only five per cent of the world's population ever having stepped inside a plane, flying is the fastest-growing contributor to

climate change. On current trends, aviation alone will account for 25 per cent of UK CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by 2050.

Alarmingly, this predicted growth in aviation completely ignores climate scientists, who warn that to avoid climate catastrophe we must keep global warming to a maximum of 1.5°C by 2030. The reality is that we've got to cut CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by a whopping 45 per cent within 10 years and definitely not – repeat *not* – increase them. However, those who can't quite kick their flying habit, or whose flight is genuinely unavoidable, have been thrown an apparent lifeline.

Carbon offsetting is the seemingly simple idea that the CO<sup>2</sup> emissions from your flight can be balanced out by paying for things such as renewable energy projects or planting trees, which will remove the equivalent amount of CO<sup>2</sup>. Demand for offsetting is booming: from flights to Formula One motor racing, you name it and you can offset it.

But offsetting is also massively controversial, with factions on either side of the argument deeply polarised: and with little or no regulation or consensus on standards, confusion and disagreement

reign. From how much CO<sup>2</sup> a flight may or not produce to the reality of the projects you can give your money to, the carbon offsetting market is, frankly, a dog's dinner.

**T**he first step to offsetting is to work out how much CO<sup>2</sup> your flight emitted. You do this by using an online carbon calculator, which all offset companies offer. The confusion over offsetting starts here, as different companies' calculators produce different results.

Say you wanted to know how much CO<sup>2</sup> emissions were generated by a return flight from Manchester to Nairobi. Many companies' calculators give a result of 2.12 tonnes of CO<sup>2</sup>, which would cost £16 to offset. One company though, *atmosfair*, suggests a CO<sup>2</sup> footprint of 4.29 tonnes, which in turn costs £84 to offset, a significantly higher figure.

So why the difference? Julia Zhu from *atmosfair* explains: "As recommended by the UN we include other pollutants like nitrogen oxide or soot particles that warm the climate in addition to CO<sup>2</sup>. For this reason, the impact of a flight with *atmosfair* is higher and stricter than with most other emissions

calculators as we believe this represents the real climate impact of flying."

In addition, the cost of offsetting with *atmosfair* is higher than with many other companies. This is because *atmosfair* runs its own offset projects, which are run on much stricter environmental standards, which in turn costs more. "However," Julia points out, "the damage to the climate caused by flights can never be completely offset." For these reasons *atmosfair* is widely considered to be one of the more reputable offset companies, and were the winners when *BBC Wildlife* looked at offsetting over a decade ago. So how does *atmosfair* measure up now?

Most of *atmosfair*'s offset projects involve providing fuel-efficient cooking equipment to low-income households across the global south in countries such as Rwanda. "Here, many people still use firewood for cooking, and we provide cook-stoves that use a lot less firewood, which results in lower carbon emissions. This also helps protect local forests by reducing the need for cutting down more trees," says Julia.

Virtually all of *atmosfair*'s projects are certified by Gold Standard, a certification ▶



organisation that was set up by WWF and other NGOs to ensure strict standards for offset projects. But crucially, does offsetting actually work?

Many offset schemes are clearly dodgy. For example, both forestry and tree-planting schemes that some offset companies offer have a bad reputation and are avoided by organisations such as *atmosfair*. A 2016 EU report claimed that just 15 per cent of the offset projects under the UN scheme set up by the Kyoto Protocol to cut emissions were successful. The report, though, is controversial itself, with opponents accusing it of being confusing and inaccurate.

On the other hand, Gold Standard certified offsets are subjected to some of the toughest standards in the offset market and weren't the focus of the report, so what about them? "Some projects are good; the majority of projects, though, aren't and there are genuine concerns around the cook-stove projects," says Gilles Dufrasne from the NGO Carbon Market Watch.

These concerns about cook-stove offsets were mirrored by the many environmental organisations and individuals contacted by *BBC Wildlife*. All agreed cook-stoves are a good thing in themselves, but all also expressed concerns about the offset claims endorsed by Gold Standard. For example, Mike

## "We're advising people to take fewer, longer holidays - ideally no more than one flight a year."

Berners Lee, an expert in carbon-footprinting, dismisses cook-stove offsets claiming that they fail the additionality test, a key indicator for offsets, which requires evidence that carbon reduction wouldn't have occurred anyway. "Cook-stoves aren't even removing carbon, they're just helping somebody else to reduce their emissions," says Mike.

Sarah Leugers from Gold Standard flatly rejects these claims: "Clean cooking technology is very rarely financially viable without some sort of support such as development aid, subsidies, or in this case, carbon finance (via offsetting). Projects must demonstrate financial additionality in order to earn Gold Standard certification."

WWF is also still supportive of both Gold Standard and offsetting, with a

spokesperson saying: "We view carbon offsetting as a measure of last-resort during decarbonisation. First, emissions must be avoided and reduced through changes in technologies and behaviour, and only then, the residual offset." Nonetheless with questions still hanging over cook-stove offsets, it's nigh impossible to reach an impartial verdict.

This inability to say categorically whether these offset schemes work or not highlights one of the key problems with the offset market. "It's enormously confusing for consumers," says Josie Wexler from *Ethical Consumer* magazine. "Verifying claims about offsetting is virtually impossible because there's no way to accurately measure any of these things, as it's such a big and complicated issue."

What we can say with certainty is that many environmental groups are deeply unhappy with the way in which the airline industry is rushing to embrace offsetting, with many training their fire on EasyJet's announcement in November 2019 to introduce tree-planting offset schemes: "Offsetting seems like the answer to a prayer from every polluting company that's under pressure over their climate impacts but doesn't want to do the hard work on

cutting emissions, as if it's a get-out-of-jail-free card," says Doug Parr, chief scientist at Greenpeace UK.

Gilles Dufrasne agrees, adding: "The problem with initiatives such as EasyJet's is the way it's being marketed as a way of justifying the status quo and inaction by saying 'It's fine, you can continue to fly to Barcelona for a weekend,' and this is totally independent of whether the offsets are good or not."

So where does this leave you if you just want to make the right choice? "If you want to cut emissions then play safe and stick with investing in renewable solar and wind schemes here in the UK, and if you've not already done it, try going vegan," advises Josie.

With offsetting seemingly unable to live up to the hype, momentum is now building to change people's behaviour and encourage them to fly less instead. Already we've seen the success of the Swedish flight shame movement, which is causing would-be passengers to abandon the plane in increasing numbers, something that is giving the aviation industry the jitters.

Here in the UK, Climate Perks is a new campaign encouraging people to switch the plane for the train by getting their employers to offer two additional days of paid leave. These 'journey days' would give people the time to get to their holiday destination

by either train or boat. "We found that 50 per cent of people are ready to reduce the amount they fly in response to climate change, but only three per cent of us do, and the key barrier is time," says Leo Murray from the group Possible, which runs the campaign.

Architect Ben Hopkins, whose employers are one of the 40 who've already signed up to Climate Perks, says: "If you choose to pay for carbon offsetting and it makes you feel that it's OK to emit even one more gram of CO<sup>2</sup>, then you probably shouldn't be offsetting. Reduction must be the absolute priority."

Others are now working on the tourist industry to act on climate change. "We're advising people to take fewer, longer holidays and ideally no more than one flight a year," says Justin Francis, CEO of the online travel company Responsible Travel, which stopped offering offsets in 2009 as it was felt that they encouraged a business-as-usual attitude.

"Tourism can be a real force for good, especially eco-tourism, but it needs to adapt to a changed climate, so we're not anti-flying but we are pro-flying much less," adds Justin, who is scathing about the proliferation of companies that are now offering 'carbon neutral' holidays.

"Carbon neutral' holidays involving flights are a clever marketing tool, but they don't exist," says Justin. "As an industry, we need to be honest with consumers about the impacts of their travel and make carbon reduction a priority."

Ultimately, we need to take ownership of the impact of flying, says Leo: "If people want to take responsibility for the emissions produced when they fly, rather than offset, a better option is to donate to the victims of climate change that's already happening, such as efforts to help the wildlife impacted by the Australian bushfires," he says. "Donating to victims acknowledges that your actions do have consequences and helps resolve the injustice in this scenario. There's an honesty in eliminating the pretence." ❏



**SIMON BIRCH** writes about environmental issues for *The Guardian* and has a regular column in *Ethical Consumer* magazine.



**WANT TO COMMENT?** What are your views on carbon offsetting, either for flying or for other carbon-emitting activities? Email us at [wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk](mailto:wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk)