

The Armchair Environmentalist's Guide to Offsets

First, burn down your rainforest...

Many off-set schemes are blatant fraud. There are examples of off-set schemes logging or burning rainforest in order to plant cash crops which are then burnt in their turn as 'renewable energy'. Surprisingly, this doesn't reduce emissions by all that much.

Second, lead-line your coal mine...

Tree-planting schemes are often criticised for not providing any real emissions reduction as the trees will eventually emit any carbon they absorb. This is true, but hey! Invest in a scheme which seals the trees in an air-tight containment area for eternity. Problem solved.

When considering a tree-planting scheme, check that the containment facilities for the mature trees are hermetically sealed and permanently secure. You don't want that carbon to escape now...

Third, lie, lie, lie...

Many of the more serious, 'tree-free' off-set schemes measure their emissions reductions against what would have been emitted had the scheme not been in operation - i.e. a reduction from a level which never happened. The more polluting your prediction, the greater your saving. Hell, why not book that flight to Florida - the more you emit, the more you can save!

We confidently assert that had we not posted this off-set article, global emissions would have been at least a thousand tonnes higher. That last sentence alone has off-set my trip to Australia.

Fourth, blackmail is a dirty fuel...

As we're comparing our actions to a fictional future, and trading on the difference, it's much easier to make the fictional future worse than to make reality better. For example, say I commute to London every day from Kent. By plane. I can claim I was intending to move to Spain, and double my emissions, but if some kind environmentalist would be good enough to buy me a heated swimming pool, I'll stay in Kent, and effectively halve my future CO2 output.

Believe it or not, this sort of shit actually goes on. For what it matters, Plane Stupid's new offices are now in Barbados.

Fifth, a stitch in time...

Off-setting takes no account of the fact that cuts now are better than cuts later. If I emit one tonne today, and my off-set scheme saves one tonne over the next three years, I'm still in the red. I would have to save more than I emit to make up for the time lag.

Off-set schemes don't do this, possibly because they really haven't thought this through!

Sixth, remember the Empire!

We're in the rich West, and what's the point of doing anything in the West when you can get it done by poor brown people for pennies?

Out-sourcing is the future, and as World Bank chief economist Lawrence Summers said, Africa is a 'vastly under-polluted continent'. We might not be able to give them the benefits of industrialised society, but we can certainly give them the costs.

Seventh, think of a number between one and a million...

...and call it zero. What does 'carbon neutral' mean? Not only are we producing far more carbon than we can afford, the atmosphere already has 36% more CO₂ than it would naturally. 'Zero' is actually a distant memory. 'Neutrality' is sitting back and watching the catastrophe. The solution to climate change is not to keep CO₂ levels where they are - we need to reduce, and quickly.

Eighth, multiply it by your age and divide by your IQ...

Check out the different carbon calculators on the off-set sites - put in the same flights and you'll get radically different results. Some claim a flight to Paris can be off-set for a fiver, some for only 38p. But they wouldn't lie to you, would they? I mean, it's not as if they're trying to sell you something...

Ninth, give the money to climate criminals...

If you're off-setting a flight then, even if the airline aren't getting a cut, you're still subsidising climate destruction. So long as you're off-setting, the urgently needed reductions in flights will be easier for them to avoid. Once they've doubled our runways and trebled our flights, the realisation that action on the never-never isn't going to cut it will be too late.

On current forecasts, aviation is set to use up the UK's entire carbon budget by 2030. There are only so many lightbulbs to replace.

This is not a reason not to off-set when you fly, this is a reason not to fly.

Off-setting doesn't make flying 'OK' any more than giving to Amnesty gets you a licence to torture. We've got this the wrong way round - supporting emission reduction schemes is good - balancing that with your own emissions undoes that good. The ship is sinking. Pissing overboard is one way of avoiding adding to the problem, but it's not going to save anyone.

Get down to the engine room and start bailing.