

CAN'T SEE THE EMISSIONS FOR THE TREES

By Claire

It's tempting to think that we can all continue to live our high-consumption lifestyles, and climate change will go away if we just stick a bit of cash in the right direction. Keep your fingers crossed, someone will invent the technofix to save all our skins. We hope. This is certainly the response encouraged by The CarbonNeutral Company (formerly Future Forests) and Climate Care, the two UK companies pioneering carbon offsetting, the practice of planting trees or funding energy efficiency projects to 'neutralise' the burning of fossil fuels.

Future Forests, rock legend has it, was first conceived of around Joe Strummer's campfire at Glastonbury 1997. The Strummer/Glastonbury connection gave the company the kudos to break into the mainstream. Strummer's tree plantation, 'Rebel Woods', is the first of many 'celebrity forests'. You can now also dedicate a tree in the Atomic Kitten forest, or help offset the greenhouse gas emissions of the Super Furry Animals. But, as Geldof's performance at the G8 proved, you can't trust a rock star to have a political opinion on your behalf. The late rock legend may have slammed popstars for 'turning rebellion into money', but as the man who sold a Clash song to a Levi's advert it should come as no surprise that his solutions to climate change were somewhat less than revolutionary.

With its re-brand as The CarbonNeutral Company, Future Forests is shedding its roots and going for the big money to be made from helping corporates get a green image on the cheap. It has moved away from simply providing a way of donating to tree planting, to helping businesses to 'fully understand the opportunities, as well as the risks, presented by carbon emissions', through its carbon consulting, risk management and marketing communications work.

British Airways announced in September 2005 that customers booking through its website would be invited to make their flights 'climate neutral' with Climate Care. By putting the onus on the consumer, BA neatly avoids any obligation or cost for the emissions from its flights, yet gains PR benefits. At the same time the aviation industry in the UK receives a £9 billion a year tax break, and continues to lobby against tax on aviation fuel, and for airport expansion.

Honda is offering its buyers one month's free carbon offset through The CarbonNeutral Company. But what is one month's 'offset' in comparison to the emissions over the lifespan of the car? What benefit to the climate is there in painting a car company as a market leader in environmental protection?

Planting trees and energy efficiency are important things to do in themselves, but the trouble with linking them to offset programmes is that their positive impact is cancelled out by justifying and condoning a negative one, implying that we can consume at current rates guilt free as long as we have the money to salve our consciences, which takes us no further forwards in reducing emissions. If anything, it takes us backwards, as corporations are able to ride on the image boost of appearing greener.

'Carbon neutral' implies that an exact estimation of both carbon emitted and carbon locked up (or 'sequestered'), is possible and verifiable. It also implies that the carbon sequestered in trees is equivalent to the coal/gas carbon extracted from deep in the earth.

The first of these assumptions is highly contested ; and the second is just plain wrong. Claiming that carbon stored by trees is safely locked away, as it was under the earth, is simply not true. Carbon in trees is part of the active carbon pool, and moves freely between the forests, oceans and air, whereas

fossil carbon is from a very inert underground carbon pool and once released cannot return to it for millennia. Cambridge landscape historian Oliver Rackham described the idea of telling people to plant trees as carbon sinks as having all the practical effect of drinking more water to keep down rising sea levels. Even if this was a scientifically credible solution, we would have to plant an area of new trees the size of Devon and Cornwall every year and maintain them forever if we were to 'neutralise' all UK carbon emissions.

It is questionable how much any of these schemes contribute. 'You have to be able to calculate exactly how much of an improvement over "business as usual" you're making,' comments Larry Lohmann of The Corner House. 'But there are huge disputes raging over these calculations.' For example, to buy the 'carbon rights' in a tree the companies expect only to pay a small portion of the £5 cost of planting and maintaining it. So, can customers be confident that their tree would not have been planted without 'offset' money?

References

The Clash, 'White Man in Hammersmith Palais'

see, e.g., Nilsson, S. et al., "Full Carbon Account for Russia", Interim Report IR-00-021, IIASA, Laxenburg, Austria, 22 August 2000, p. 115, www.iiasa.ac.at

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