

Offsetting As a Sop To the Conscience

Written By: **Ron Dembo**
Date: **June, 2007** Original Version

OFFSETTING AS A SOP TO THE CONSCIENCE

→ Carbon offsetting provokes a powerful emotional response in some people. They just don't like the idea that you can pay someone else to mop up your carbon emissions. It smacks of indulgence and cheating. Buying an offset while continuing to fly, or drive and SUV, or live in a mansion with all the lights on, is at best hypocritical, and at worst, downright dangerous, the critics say. It simply avoids the issue, which is that we should be reducing our carbon footprint, and simply encourages the delusion that we can go on living in an environmentally profligate way.

Some even compare offsetting with the Papal indulgences of the late Middle Ages, where Catholics were offered redemptions for their sins in return for donations to the Church – buying their way out of punishment for wrongdoing. This is exactly what modern-day carbon offsetters are trying to do, say the critics. They think money will purchase them a clear conscience while they fill the sky with their fumes.

Certain high profile stories, mainly about celebrities trying to offset carbon-intensive lifestyles, give credence to the criticisms, but it is far from the whole picture. Offsetting is something that is practiced by thousands of individuals and organizations, most of which are neither hypocritical nor delusional. Let's look at the argument more closely.

First, let's acknowledge that our number one priority must be to reduce our carbon output in every way possible – switching to a renewable energy supplier, insulating our homes, driving less, etc. But let's also acknowledge that even if this is done with the best will in the world, most of us will reach a point where we cannot easily, or perhaps affordably, do much more in the short term. Few of us have lived our lives entirely by environmental priorities, and most of us have woken up to climate change at a point where we are in houses or offices, or own cars, or hold down jobs that were never designed with carbon neutrality in mind.

Even if we take whatever steps we can to reduce, recycle and reuse now, and make a commitment that our next car will run on biofuel and that we will fit solar panels to our house, etc., most individuals, or organizations endeavoring to go carbon neutral, will be left with a residue of current emissions. Now we have two choices – we can ignore them, or we can offset.

Ignoring them might avoid having to think through the ethical issues around offsetting, but it is not going to help the planet. On the other hand, offsetting them will ensure that as long as we continue to produce emissions, they will be counterbalanced by a saving or sequestering somewhere else. It is the

environmentally responsible thing to do.

We've been talking about the residual emissions left after taking a reduction strategy as far as we can. Now let's go back to the case of the pop star or movie actor who appears to have no immediate intention of giving up flying, or selling their SUV, but who decides to offset. On the one hand we could cry, "Hypocrite!", and denounce them for trying to buy environmental redemption. Or we could recognize that they have at least acknowledged that their lifestyle has an environmental price. For the wealthy, this price is relatively trivial at the moment if they are simply accounting for their flying or driving, but it is the start of a cultural process – a process of accepting the cost to the planet of our actions, and building this into our economy.

Over time, the cost of carbon will rise and will be factored into all the products and services we consume, and this will begin to have greater impact on our behavior as the price differential between our old habits and a new greener lifestyle increases. Celebrities have a part to play in highlighting issues such as climate change, and in endorsing the concept that we must pay for our impact on the planet.

We need to be realistic too. Many people are going to continue to take long-haul holiday flights, drive SUVs and run high-energy households no matter what anybody says. The process of persuasion and change will be slow. Denouncing people for taking a step towards environmental awareness and carbon neutrality is counterproductive. It will discourage positive action, and polarize the debate. We should be trying to move people on in their environmental thinking, not alienate them.

Some individuals and organizations will no doubt abuse offsetting in order to indulge in environmentally irresponsible behavior, but to condemn all offsetting on this basis is to overlook the best intentions and goodwill of the majority who participate. We are all trying to find a way forward with global warming. We know it will take a combination of many individual, community, corporate, government and international efforts. Offsetting has a role to play. It is empowering at the individual level. And, unlike the Papal indulgences of the past, offsetting can have a real effect in reducing the carbon levels in our atmosphere, and slowing the pace of climate change.

ABOUT ZEROFOOTPRINT

→ Zerofootprint is a socially responsible enterprise whose mission is to apply technology, design and risk management to the massive reduction of our environmental footprint. We operate both in the for-profit and charitable domains through two entities, Zerofootprint Software and Zerofootprint Foundation using shared technology.