

Setting a Sustainable Example

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→ It is not surprising that WWF's around the world private jet expedition for wealthy wildlife enthusiasts has led to cries of hypocrisy, particularly by anti-environmentalists and climate change deniers. Tickets for the 25-day journey to see exotic natural species in remote corners of the world cost \$65,000 per person, while the jet's circumnavigation of the globe will dump over 1,000 tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere. The trip appears starkly at odds with WWF's mission to save the planet, and raises questions about when and how air travel and other high environmental impact actions might be justified.

No doubt WWF believes that the funds and awareness raised justify the trip, but the message it sends out is all wrong. Ordinary people will ask why they should make efforts like turning down their thermostats or carpooling, which will save fractional amounts of emissions, while WWF's officials and their wealthy guests leave a massive trail of carbon as they go swanning round the globe in their jet. It undermines everything else WWF is trying to say about nature conservation and climate change. Its like the revelation that while Al Gore was touring the world giving his An Inconvenient Truth lecture, his Tennessee mansion was soaking up electricity like a sponge. Gore has done more than almost anyone to raise awareness of global warming, but the chorus of criticism that greeted the news that his energy bill was many times that of the average household showed the importance of walking the walk, and not just talking the talk.

This is about getting our priorities right, and setting an example. Gore has subsequently turned his home into a model of energy efficiency, but it would have been better to have done it before he set out to lecture the world. Meanwhile, the makers of An Inconvenient Truth claimed to have offset all emissions generated by the filming. As it turned out, the offsets were of questionable legitimacy, once again undermining the message that they were trying to put across.

This is not to say that carbon offsets don't work, or that all flying is evil, or that environmentalists are all hypocrites. But we have to make a distinction between actions that are legitimate, in the sense that they result in a greater good or are unavoidable in some way, and those that are simply careless or indulgent. Jetting round the world to view endangered species is an indulgence. Undertaking a journey to warn of the dangers of global warming may be necessary, but leaving the lights on while you are away is careless, as is not ensuring that the measures you take to compensate for the impact of your journey actually work.

We in the West have to recognize that we have unsustainably large carbon footprints – over ten times that of the average person in India, for example. All of us have to look at how we can reduce our emissions. To keep global temperatures below the threshold that will avoid runaway global warming we in the West are going to have to shrink our footprints down to where the average Indian is now. It is difficult to see how we will do this without offsetting playing a big part. Therefore, we have to ensure that offsets work properly, and that their processes are transparent. WWF would be better off concentrating on its positive work in setting offsetting standards, instead of arranging eco-destructive holidays for the rich.

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.