
Carbon neutral cheating

Being “carbon neutral” seems to have become fashionable. The World Bank, the Vatican, the World Olympics, the Football World Cup, the Body Shop, the Rolling Stones, and a long list of celebrities proclaim themselves to be totally or partially “carbon neutral”. Even Mercedes Benz recently held in California what was described as “the world’s first ever carbon neutral fashion week”! It is therefore understandable that the New Oxford American Dictionary has proclaimed “carbon neutral” as its Word of the Year for 2006.

One must acknowledge that being “carbon neutral” sounds good –and that some of those mentioned above honestly believe to be doing the right thing- because it gives the impression that “neutral” is synonymous to not emitting at all. However, the concept hides a dangerous cheating game, where many corporate players are winning, while the Earth’s climate is losing.

Perhaps the best way to “neutralize” this absurdity is through ridicule. That is what people who created the Cheatneutral website did. They invented –following the steps of the carbon offset inventors- the concept of Cheat Offsetting. “Cheatneutral –they state- “offsets your cheating by funding someone else to be faithful and NOT cheat. This neutralises the pain and unhappy emotion and leaves you with a clear conscience.”

Pretending to “neutralize” carbon emissions is equally ridiculous. Carbon neutral flights are perhaps the best way to show that this is a cheating game. Planes do not fly on renewables; they run on oil. Once burnt to enable the planes to fly, the carbon contained in the fuel is released to the atmosphere, never to return to its original storage place underground. Such carbon can never be neutralized; it will add to the increasing amount of atmospheric carbon that is destroying the Planet’s climate.

In spite of that, the very imaginative carbon marketeers have thought out a way of making money out of this. If individuals don’t want to feel guilty or if companies wish to market themselves as being “climate friendly”, there are an increasing number of companies willing –in exchange for some money- to provide them with a way out.

For instance, the UK-based Carbon Neutral Company says that “Flying is one of the fastest increasing causes of climate change, due to the carbon emitted.” However, whoever may feel concerned about that is immediately assured that it is possible to “Neutralise your carbon emissions with our Carbon Neutral Flights, and make your travel greener.” Depending on the flight distance, “neutralizing” your flight has a cost ranging from £4.50 to £52.50. Apart from freeing you from guilt, the company also provides buyers with a “Certificate with a personal dedication if you wish”, a “Colour map and information about ‘your’ projects”, a “Baggage tag made of recycled leather” and a “Cream folder, tied with ribbon.” (this is not a joke, it’s in Carbon Neutral’s website!).

Many other companies have been created to benefit from carbon offsetting. TerraPass, Native Energy, DriveNeutral, Climate Friendly, AtmosFair, Climate Care, GreenSeat are some examples within a growing number of companies offering such services.

The means these companies use for “offsetting” are diverse, ranging from efficient light bulbs to planting trees. Within this cheating game, it is the latter that concern us most. A recent report (State of the Voluntary Carbon Market 2007) explains that some projects are more “charismatic” than others, adding that “Trees is one area of carbon sequestration that everyone understands, even little kids understand it... people get it.”

In spite of their “charisma”, trees have proved to be problematic and this had led some pro-carbon neutral institutions to publicly disassociate themselves with such schemes: “Due to the many problems with tree planting projects, the David Suzuki Foundation only purchases offsets from energy efficiency and renewable energy projects.” The Body Shop explains that “In 2006 we offset our business air travel ... by funding non-tree planting projects”. The Cleaner Climate Company –that provides carbon neutral services to Adobe- explains that it “does not plant trees” because “the science behind carbon sequestration is not accurate enough” and because it is “committed to having a positive impact on the local communities” –thus implying that plantations have a negative impact.

The above concern about offsets related to tree planting has not happened by chance. It is the result of years of campaigning against large scale monoculture tree plantations and documenting their impacts and struggles against them. Additionally, some particularly negative cases of carbon offset plantations (such as those of the Dutch FACE Foundation in Ecuador and Uganda) have been investigated and widely exposed, forcing carbon trading companies to seek for less risky investments.

This growing concern over plantations is very good news for local communities that could have been impacted by carbon offset plantations. However, it implies that the burgeoning carbon market is simply shifting to other more “charismatic” areas. This scam needs to be exposed. People must understand that being “carbon neutral” has exactly the same value as being “cheat neutral” –zero- and that real global action for drastically reducing fossil fuel emissions is urgently needed –without cheating.