

Carbon Neutral Magicians



WRM briefing - November 2008

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Being “carbon neutral” has 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 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 proclaimed "carbon neutral" as its Word of the Year in 2006.

The “offsetting” myth

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 carbon dioxide at all. However, the concept hides a dangerous cheating game, where many corporate players are winning, while the Earth’s climate is losing.

Although the term “carbon neutral” can have different meanings, it is mostly used “to describe the practice, criticized by some, of carbon offsetting, by paying others to remove or sequester 100% of the carbon dioxide emitted from the atmosphere – for example by planting trees– or by funding ‘carbon projects’ that should lead to the prevention of future greenhouse gas emissions, or by buying carbon credits to remove (or ‘retire’) them through carbon trading.” (Wikipedia)

The idea of “offsetting” fossil fuel emissions is based on the premise that the carbon released from burning fossil fuels can in some way be “offset” by other activities such as tree planting. This is simply not possible.

What needs to be understood is that the carbon released through the use of fossil fuels (coal, oil and natural gas) has not been part of the functioning of the biosphere for millions of years. Once fossil fuels are extracted and burnt, that carbon –which until then had been safely stored underground- is released, thereby increasing the above ground carbon stock. Once released, that carbon cannot be returned to its original storage place and the more it is extracted, the more the total amount of carbon in the biosphere is increased, thus further enhancing the greenhouse effect.

Cheating in the air

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. No number of air turbines, or solar cells or trees planted can make that carbon return back underground.

In spite of that, carbon marketeers are making money by selling “carbon neutrality” to individuals concerned about their contribution to climate change and to companies that wish to market themselves as being “climate friendly”. In exchange for some money, an

increasing number of carbon trading companies are willing to provide them with a “solution”.

For instance, the UK-based Carbon Neutral Company tells 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 was posted in Carbon Neutral’s website!)

Charismatic trees

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

The methods these companies use for “offsetting” are diverse, ranging from low-energy 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.

This 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 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.

The case of the Beijing Games

Big international meetings –such as major sporting events- result in large amounts of carbon emissions, thereby contributing to climate change. Given that such events have become very profitable

investment and business opportunities, they need to prove that their climate impact can be “offset” in some way or other.

For instance, according to the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Turin Winter Olympics (2006) caused the equivalent of 100,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO₂) to be released, of which 70% were –according to UNEP- “offset” through investment in power-saving and renewable energy projects in Italy and tree-planting in Kenya. On their part, the organizers of the 2006 Football World Cup said the event emitted 92,000 tonnes of CO₂, with 100,000 tonnes offset through clean energy projects in India and South Africa. This made it the first ever –or so the organizers claimed- “carbon-neutral” World Cup.

The 2008 Beijing Olympic Games was a major event, gathering large numbers of athletes and spectators from all over the world. Regarding its possible impact on carbon emissions, Technology Minister Wan Gang stated that the Olympics would result in the release of some 1.18 million tonnes of carbon to the atmosphere, “in part because so many athletes and spectators were traveling long distances”. However, he told the media that “The ‘Green Olympics’ would take a series of measures, including planting of trees and controlling the use of vehicles, to reduce emissions by between 1 million and 1.29 million tones.” “We can basically ensure that emissions will be balanced,” he said.

In words of the minister, the Games would be “basically” carbon neutral, who added that “China hoped that by holding a carbon neutral Olympics they could set a good example for the rest of the world.”

Unfortunately, “reducing” those emissions is impossible, because the fossil fuel needed for “traveling long distances” -by plane, bus and

car- was used and that carbon was emitted. No good example was set for the world; on the contrary China contributed to providing credibility to the cheating carbon trading game.

A lie repeated often enough ...

The problem is that many people honestly believe in the possibility of becoming “carbon neutral”, mostly because –as the saying goes- “a lie repeated often enough becomes truth”. And this particular lie is being constantly repeated by numerous “experts” with much to gain from carbon trading, by UN agencies such as UNEP and even by some supposedly “green” organizations.

Such is the case of the well-known WWF (which has a panda bear as its logo), whose Chinese section created a special web page for facilitating payments for becoming “carbon neutral”. The site explained that “Through its Go for Gold global campaign, WWF is also calling Olympic athletes to commit to a carbon neutral trip for the Beijing Games by donating the equivalent of the carbon cost of their flight to a Gold Standard climate-change offset project.” WWF-China even recommended five specific “sales points”:
www.climatefriendly.com, www.myclimate.org, www.atmosfair.de,
www.nativeenergy.com, www.tricoronagreen.com

This quote from WWF supports the idea that by paying -“donating”- a certain amount of money, the carbon released by the plane, bus or car will be made to disappear somewhere by someone doing something that will “offset” those emissions. Paraphrasing a well known film, this is in fact “Emission Impossible”.

Positive steps not synonymous of neutrality

In the case of the Beijing Olympics, the authorities implemented a number of measures for claiming the “carbon neutrality” of the Games: solar, wind and geothermal power would be used on venues and other Olympic-related buildings, a massive tree planting activity would be carried out, new transport technology including hybrid electric vehicles was to be developed. However, those measures bear no relationship whatsoever with “neutralizing” fossil fuel carbon emissions. There is no doubt that energy saving measures, energy efficiency, the use of solar, wind and geothermal power, the reduction in the use of cars, are all positive steps in the right direction for addressing climate change. The problem arises with the organizers’ claim that those measures would ensure that the Games will be “basically” carbon neutral and even less so that they would “have a positive effect on climate change”, as Minister Wan Gang incorrectly stated.

What is necessary for truly addressing the problem of climate change is to drastically reduce and eventually eliminate the use of fossil fuels. Effective climate action of course means that people will have to make adjustments in their day-to-day lives, but it is basically a political and systemic issue that needs to be dealt with at that level. Offset schemes discourage people from the political and community organizing that is necessary to bring about this transition to a post-fossil fuel society by placing all the emphasis on climate action at the level of the individual through the ‘light bulbs and lifestyles’ discourse. Within this context, the “carbon neutral” game is a way of diverting attention from that very real and pressing issue and must therefore be exposed as a fraud.