

## AIR TRAVEL AND THE ENVIRONMENT – Making Choices

You recycle, you keep your showers short. Maybe you even [drive an electric car](#), powered by the [solar panels](#) on your roof. In other words, you do what you can to reduce your carbon footprint and protect the environment for everyone. What else can you do? Well, try flying less. When you fly you're adding a significant amount of planet-warming gases to the atmosphere — there's no way around it.

### How does travel impact global warming?

Every time you drive or fly, you emit carbon, which contributes to global warming. Worldwide, airline travel contributes to roughly 2% of carbon emissions. For example, a flight from New York to London emits approximately 2.8 tons. Compare that to the average American's total annual emissions of about 20 tons, and you can see that flying is carbon-intensive. But there are some ways to make your airplane travel a little bit greener.

#### 1. Fly Direct

Saving the planet can be your excuse for spending the extra money on a direct flight, since planes burn the most fuel during takeoff.

#### 2. Fly coach

At last, coach passengers have something to be happy about: smaller carbon footprints.

According to a study from the World Bank, emissions associated with flying in business class are about [three times as great](#) as flying in coach. Seats in business class and first class are bigger, so fewer people are being moved by the same amount of fuel. The study estimates that a first-class seat could have a carbon footprint as much as nine times as big as an economy one.

#### 3. Buy Carbon Offsets

"Offsets can provide a useful way to help reduce your climate footprint," said [Peter Miller](#), a scientist with the Natural Resources Defense Council. "But it's important to make sure that you're getting credible and actual real emissions reductions."

### What Are Carbon Offsets – How Do They Work?

Carbon offsets are financial contributions to projects that help reduce CO2 emissions in various industries, or encourage new sustainable energy projects in an effort to balance out the damage your flight does to the planet. They took off about a decade ago, as some airlines and travel companies offered them directly to customers. Toward the end of your purchase, you could tick a box to pay an extra \$10 or so in exchange for a clean conscience. But, people often felt overwhelmed, particularly when deciding or recognizing what makes a good offset project.

By 2021, airlines that fly internationally will have to offset any extra emissions under a UN agreement (called the [Carbon Offsetting and Reduction Scheme for International Aviation](#), agreed on in 2018 in Montreal, Canada) so carriers are no longer relying on individuals to tick that box. And that probably makes the whole idea more effective.

Sources: The Sierra Club, ThePointsGuy.com Wired November 2108

For example, Delta, in 2018 [announced](#) it was offsetting carbon emissions on travel to and from 7 major airports. Lyft will be purchasing carbon offsets to make all rides in its cars carbon neutral.

Critics of carbon offsetting say that spending to offset emissions merely allows polluters to feel better about their emissions and disincentives from working to reduce them. While this may be the case, if you're going to fly, offsetting your carbon emissions is still better than doing nothing.

To make sure that an offset program really does what it says, it has to meet several criteria, including that it be verified by an independent third party. All of the programs used by the major airlines are verified by such groups to make sure they provide the carbon reduction effects that the companies claim. (Airlines have the resources to find high-quality partner organizations which in turn have the resources to find and vet high-quality projects.)

To see how various airlines offer their customers the opportunity to buy carbon offsets go to <https://thepointsguy.com/guide/a-guide-to-airline-carbon-offset-programs/>. You really have to search for the option to purchase offsets on airline sites, but a good approach is to calculate the number of miles flown in a year (regardless of airline) and buy for that number annually.

### **Certified Organizations**

But as individual consumers, we don't have the resources, time or access to evaluate individual projects in detail. The next best option is to get suggestions from environmental organizations you trust or well-recognized organizations that list certified and verified carbon offsetting projects.

Three organizations that provide such listings are [Gold Standard](#), [Green-e](#) and [Climate Action Reserve](#). On each organization's website, the projects are sortable by location and offset type(s). You can learn about the projects and decide which offset project or projects looks the best. [Gold Standard](#) makes it easy to donate to a particular project on their website, while [Green-e](#) and [Climate Action Reserve](#) refer you to individual projects. Different carbon offsetting projects charge different amounts for offsetting, but an energy efficiency project on the [Gold Standard website](#) charges \$13 to offset each ton of CO<sub>2</sub>.

### **The Bottom Line**

The relationship between travel choices and carbon emissions is not as cut-and-dry as is assumed by the offset model. After all, if you don't get on that flight to Paris, the plane will still fly. The idea is that cumulatively, the less we all fly, the less demand there will be for air travel, and the less additional supply the airlines will deliver. On the other side of the equation, the more market demand we can create for clean energy, the better. Offsetting isn't an easy out, but it is a stopgap solution until these companies can figure out [entirely green transportation with electric motors](#).

As consumers, we will need to make difficult choices in the coming years to reduce our personal carbon footprint. We will also have to pressure our politicians to vote for real, far-reaching legislation that will reduce our dependence on "dirty" energy. Carbon offsets are merely a small part of the solution.

## **ADDENDUM**

### **How does your money "offset" your travel? The Sierra Club example using *NativeEnergy*:**

First, the term "offset" might imply that you are "neutralizing" the impact of your travel, and thus it has no impact. This is not the case. Once you have emitted carbon, it is released into the atmosphere and you can't "take it back." What offsetting does is help reduce carbon emissions elsewhere.

Next, the offset model attempts to neatly compress a very complex set of calculations into a tidy equation, when in actuality, it relies on a series of assumptions and estimates. For example, the folks at *NativeEnergy* have to estimate how many passengers are on an average flight and make predictions as to how much energy a given turbine will produce over its lifetime. In addition, there is a good deal of debate among global warming experts about just how much impact flying has on global warming. So, it's important to keep in mind that the numbers generated by a carbon calculator are estimates.

There are two sides to the carbon offset equation: On one side, you calculate how much carbon a certain activity emits. Let's use as an example a flight from San Francisco to Paris. Your personal share of carbon emissions for that flight equals approximately 4.5 tons.

On the other side of the equation, the folks at *NativeEnergy* have identified a potential wind energy project that needs additional funding to be built. They calculate how much wind energy this project will generate over its lifetime and assign a dollar figure to each kilowatt-hour based on the cost of generating it. *NativeEnergy* reasons that every kilowatt-hour of clean energy generated by its project replaces a kilowatt-hour that would have otherwise been generated by a "dirty" energy source, e.g., a coal-fired power plant.

The idea of "offsetting" is that your monetary contribution is responsible for a share of the wind project that equals the amount of carbon you've emitted by your activity. In the case of the flight to Paris, you would pay \$60 to *NativeEnergy* to help fund the building of a wind farm.

