

Don't be CO2ned

by Adam Manit
Monday, 10 April 2006

As we begin to face the prospects of a world utterly distressed by climate chaos, many of us are beginning to ask what we can do to be part of the solution. Organisations like CAT have long led the way in promoting the renewable energy revolution we so desperately need as part of a collective vision of a fossil-fuel-free future. Some might argue that the new "carbon offset" industry, typified by outfits such as Oxford-based Climate Care, are playing a part in that revolution. They purport to do this by linking the emissions we create from our over-consuming lifestyles in the privileged North with supposedly climate friendly projects in the Global South. It is, on the face of it, a seductive proposition.

It is also a highly contentious one.

The sales pitch from companies such as Climate Care relies heavily on the charitable impulse of their clientele. Their marketing is reminiscent of the controversial child sponsorship schemes of the early 80s, when some charities' campaigns suggested that all one needed to do to prevent hunger and disease was "sponsor a child" (or, in the case of climate change, "a tree", "a stove", etc.) and everything would be OK. Don't worry about analysing the real reasons for poverty in the South and what really needs to be done to solve it, (or what the real reasons for climate change are and what really needs to be done to solve it). Don't look at the economic policies of the World Bank and the IMF, corporate plunder of the world's resources, Northern over-consumption and global inequality. No just sponsor this child in Guatemala (this lighting project in Kazakhstan) and ease your conscience.

The carbon offset industry not only relies on this fundamental disconnect " it nurtures it.

Their appeal is so great simply because they require us to take no meaningful action other than to buy their services. One company, Climate Friendly, guarantees: "In 5 minutes and for the cost of a cappuccino a week, you can go climate neutral now." The Government is sold on the idea, and has promised to "offset" all its official flights beginning, fittingly April Fools Day.

The overall effect of the industry is to make it even harder to persuade people to actually "reduce" their emissions from source. As Jutta Kill from environmental group FERN states: "The only meaningful solution to the climate crisis is a swift switch to low carbon economies. Not easy, but also not impossible " if only we found the courage to give it a real try. And that's what the illusion of "offsetting" carbon emissions prevents."

Soumitra Ghosh, from the National Forum for Forest Peoples and Forest Workers in India, who are fighting offset projects in their country agrees. "We have nothing against planting trees or people helping communities in "poor" countries. But if such actions mean that "actual" and measurable emissions of greenhouse gases would continue as usual under the safe cloak of "offsets" and some people would earn dollars and euros out of such supposedly "green" and "environmental" actions, perhaps it's time to tear the cloak, once and for all."

Carbon offsets undermine effective action against climate change. They send the wrong signals to high polluters and work against the goals of climate justice. Many offset projects are also highly contentious and are actively opposed by communities in the Global South. Rather than funding some dubious offset projects to absolve our climate sins, we should be focusing on the one thing we know must happen if the worst excesses of climate chaos are to be avoided – reductions at source. Fly less, buy less, regulate polluters and support communities affected by pollution and climate change. The real solution to climate change is social change. Don't be CO2-nned by the offset industry.

À

Adam Maanit is Research Associate for Carbon Trade Watch (a project of the Amsterdam-based think-tank the Transnational Institute) and a co-editor of New Internationalist magazine which will devote an entire issue to the subject of carbon offsets in July.