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Travel Greener with Carbon Offsets

Pat Terry

Booking a flight to Denver, driving across Chicago to visit the in-laws – or just hopping the bus to work? Go green or “greener” anyway by using carbon offsets for your travel.

“Carbon offsets” is a term energy conscious folks are tossing around in conversation and, while a few listeners may nod knowingly, most of us can’t really tell you what it means. That included me, as I found out at a recent church Green Committee meeting.

So I decided to check it out.

Basically, carbon offsets are a financial way to neutralize our impact on the environment, whether that impact is energy use at home or during travel. The money we voluntarily pay, based on the amount of CO2 pollution we contribute, helps finance and build clean and renewable energy projects.

NativeEnergy, a renewable energy marketing company (the exclusive carbon offset provider for Al Gore’s book and movie, “An Inconvenient Truth” and for Mr. Gore’s travel) located in Burlington, Vermont, explains the importance of offsets on their Web site www.nativeenergy.com.

“Reducing the amount of energy we use is critically important in the effort to stop global warming, but it isn’t nearly enough,” the site stresses.

“Even if you drive a hybrid car, use compact fluorescent lighting and take every energy saving step you can, you are still going to use some energy and create CO2 pollution. Carbon offsets are the only practical way you can reduce your global warming pollution to zero.”

Companies such as Ecoventura, which operates tours to the Galapagos, are buying travel offsets for the cruise portion of the trip, and suggesting that passengers may want to do the same for their air travel to Ecuador.

But how do you figure that “travel footprint”?

“It’s simple,” says Megan Epler Wood of NativeEnergy. “ You use our Travel Calculator to determine how many miles you’re flying or if you’re traveling by land, to determine the miles driving or using public transport.”

Travelers type in their start point and destination or the actual miles, as well as the method of travel, and the calculator brings up the tons of COs created by the flight or land transportation, as well as a fee for counterbalancing that carbon.

“Once the calculator goes through the process, you’ll get a chance to select from three main types of carbon offset products,” Epler Wood relates. “ You can choose from investing in wind power or you can invest in a bio methane capture, energy producing project or you can actually invest in a blend of the two.”

I decided to give it a try, and plugged in a recent roundtrip between Chicago and Tucson, to visit my sister. It’s 2,887.12 miles and contributes 1.155 tons of CO2. To offset that with an investment in new clean and renewable energy, I can pay a one-time \$24 fee to NativeEnergy (It’s only \$12 driving a small car, despite the greater mileage).

But does the Travel Calculator work with overseas flights, too?

I typed in Chicago to Saigon to find out how much CO2 I’d be contributing on an upcoming

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volunteer trip to Vietnam - a home-building stint with Global Habitat for Humanity.

The results were a little sobering: I'll be dumping 6.959 tons of CO2 in the environment for a 17,396.55 - mile flight roundtrip - and I've decided to pay the \$84 offset to fund clean new energy from wind farms. Maybe my offset will go towards a project like the Alex Little Soldier Wind Turbine on the Rosebud (Sioux) Reservation in South Dakota - about an hour from the Pine Ridge Reservation where I'm headed this fall in a minivan.

What will that offset cost? \$12 to counter 0.782 tons of CO2 on the 1,759.89 - mile round trip. And I'm splitting it with five other people.

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