

# Carbon cop-outs

by Kevin Smith, Red Pepper  
Tuesday, 05 December 2006

They might salve our climate consciences, but carbon offset schemes are no substitute for the kind of collective action and social change that is necessary to combat global warming, writes Kevin Smith

À

The carbon offset industry was all about growth in 2006. The highprofile Carbon Neutral Company reported an annual turnover of £2.7 million, while the global market sold an estimated £60 million, a figure that is expected to increase fivefold in the next three years. From the World Cup to HSBC and BP's offset petrol, individuals, organisations and corporations have been keen to prove their climate-friendly credentials by going 'carbon neutral'. The success of the different schemes reflects the fact that there is an increase in popular awareness about the need to engage with climate change. But are these schemes offering a valid approach to the problem, or are they detracting from the real action that needs to take place?

The first carbon offset project was organised in the US in 1989, when Applied Energy Services had its plans to build a 183 megawatt coal-fired power station approved partly due to its pioneering offset, which involved planting 50 million trees in the impoverished Western Highlands of Guatemala. This initial project was beset by many of the problems that have plagued offset projects ever since. The non-native trees that were planted initially were inappropriate for the local ecosystem and caused land degradation. The local people had their habitual subsistence activities, such as gathering fuel wood, criminalised. Ten years on from the start of the project, evaluators concluded that the offset target was far from being reached.

Some years later, in 1996, the idea to set up a company to market such schemes was cooked up and Future Forests (which later changed its name to the Carbon Neutral Company) was launched. It gained a great deal of publicity initially through high-profile celebrity endorsements from the likes of the Rolling Stones, Leonardo di Caprio and Brad Pitt. Climate Care established itself the following year, and by 2006 there were a further 21 companies marketing voluntary offset projects to individuals, companies and events.

Some environmentalists were dubious about both the ethics and the efficacy of carbon offsets from the beginning, but the dark clouds of doubt and controversy have been gathering throughout 2006. In April, articles appeared in the national press suggesting that some 40 per cent of the mango trees in southern India that Coldplay had sponsored to offset the emissions from the recording of their second album had died. The villagers who were supposed to be the benefactors of the scheme made allegations of unfulfilled promises and project mismanagement, and there was a breakdown in relations between the Carbon Neutral Company and its project partner in India. Yet for months afterwards, fans of the band were still being sold dedicated trees in the plantations that were still being portrayed as a glowing success story.

In October, the UK Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) ordered the Scottish and Southern Energy Group (SSE) to stop making claims about 'neutralising' its customers' emissions in its leaflets. In the contentious advert, the SSE claimed to 'plant trees to balance out the CO<sub>2</sub> that your gas heating and household waste produces'. Although the SSE was able to provide figures on what emissions the average household produced, the lack of scientific knowledge about the carbon cycle meant that it was unable to provide sufficient evidence that the number of trees it planted would match or exceed the level of emissions, and it was thus in breach of the ASA guidelines. It has yet to be seen what impact this ruling will have on the countless other spurious 'neutralising' claims made by similar offset schemes.

These incidents, and many others, have highlighted some of the technical problems with offset schemes, and have brought the environmental or social shortcomings of specific projects into focus. Less has been written about how offset schemes are fundamentally ineffective in addressing climate change through their emphasis on personal consumption,

lifestyle and individual action.

Social change is a necessary precursor to dealing with climate change. There is an urgent need to restructure society away from the fossil fuels-based, carcentred, throwaway economy 'business as usual' scenario to one in which we pragmatically reduce our emissions levels in the context of a renewable energy-based, participatory, diversified transport, reuse/recycle economy. No matter how many low-energy light bulbs you install, or how much recycling you do, there is still the need for more systemic changes to take place in society. No amount of individualistic action is going to bring about this change in itself.

Such changes will not happen without community organising and collective political action. Yet there are no offset schemes that encourage individuals to engage in collective action to bring about wider structural change. Offset schemes place the onus for climate action on individuals acting in isolation from others. This inhibits their political effectiveness.

The act of commodification at the heart of offset schemes assigns a financial value to the impetus that someone may feel to take climate action, and neatly transforms this potential to bring about change into another market transaction. There is then no urgent need for people to question the underlying assumptions about the nature of the social and economic structures that brought about climate change in the first place. One just has to click and pay the assigned price to get 'experts' to take action on your behalf. Not only is it ineffective and based on half-baked guessing games and dubious science, it is also very disempowering for the participants.

The single most effective - and incontrovertible - way of dealing with climate change is drastically to limit the quantity of fossil fuels being extracted. Providing support for communities who are resisting the efforts of the industries to extract and burn ever-increasing quantities, therefore, is one of the most important strategies in dealing with climate change. Yet it is the least encouraged because, unlike carbon offsets, it involves posing a critical challenge to the established systems of corporate power and societal organisation.

One of the most inspiring recent examples of effective climate action has been the victory of the Ogoni women in stopping Shell from flaring gas from its oil fields in Nigeria. Not only was this the source of numerous pollution and health problems for the Ogoni people; it was also the single largest source of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in sub-Saharan Africa. This hard-won victory, a huge success in terms of both social justice and climate change, depended on community empowerment, confrontational politics and international solidarity.

One of the most distressing effects of the culture of offsets is the fact that it negates all three of these factors. Instead of community empowerment, climate change is presented as a matter of individualistic morality and lifestyle choices that discourages collective political action. We are being led to believe that responsible consumer choice is all that is necessary on our part, rather than engaging in a different kind of political responsibility and activity - one that confronts the fact that there are profound changes that need to be made in our society in order to effectively deal with climate change. The notion of international solidarity is transformed into a one-sided affair involving a neo-colonial relationship of economic advantage and conditional aid.

Promoting a more systemic approach to climate change would not seek to reduce the problem to marketing gimmicks, technological quick fixes or neo-colonial exploitation. Any individual, organisation or government embracing this holistic attitude would commit to doing everything they could to reduce their climate impact, but would not 'offset' responsibility for their remaining emissions. Rather they would commit to demanding, adopting and supporting climate policies that reduce emissions at source.

This means supporting stricter regulation, powers of oversight and penalties for polluters at all levels. It means supporting communities adversely impacted by climate change and so-called 'climate-friendly' projects. Finally, it means endorsing the notion that real solutions to climate change require social change; and, for those who count themselves as a part of

that movement, spending time and energy towards achieving such change.

Kevin Smith is a researcher with Carbon Trade Watch, a project of the Transnational Institute. He is co-author of *The Carbon Neutral Myth: offset indulgences for your climate sins*, forthcoming in January 2007

source: <http://www.tni.org/archives/ksmith/cop-outs.htm>