

Enough of the Details, Just Tell me What to Do! How / where to buy carbon offsets

Carbon Offsets Working Paper (Offsets Document #3)
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November 25, 2014 (V2)

This third working paper about offsets was written to address a frequent complaint by readers of the first two papers: "My life is just too complicated to understand all these details; could you please just tell me a short cut about how to do the right thing?". Thus, this paper intends to offer our own experience and applied methods to individual or institutional decision makers how to enter the carbon offset market in the most simple way.

First and foremost understand that carbon neutrality should not be achieved simply by buying carbon offsets. In the short term it is possible to completely offset your emissions through such purchases but imagine what would happen if everyone tried buying offsets to support their American lifestyle. The offsets within the market would quickly become entirely subscribed with little change in behavior. This is why quality based offset management organizations emphasize that the primary goal is to REDUCE emissions in the first place and use offsets as a stepping stone to steady reductions in activities which cause global warming. Most quality based offset programs insist that no more than 50% of individual or institution emissions should be addressed through offsets. However this too is an oversimplification and a more nuanced analysis is required.

Next, it is imperative that each entity, individual and institution alike, understand its existing institutional or emission behavior using a quality measurement device and what its appropriate emission goal should be to attain fair-share of emission reduction for climate stability.

If you are an institution, you likely need to locate a professional service provider to analyze your organization's emission behaviors. They may be subsidized by other entities to make the service more affordable or they may charge for evaluating and making recommendations for achieving net zero emissions. Examples include Stockholm Environmental Institute (international) and Bonneville Environmental Institute (USA). For brevity, we won't offer more about institutional processes in this paper.

For individual behaviors we observe peer reviewed analysis finds that the ultimate goal is to reach sustainable per capita carbon emissions somewhere in the range of 1.5 to 5 metric tons of CO₂ equivalency (Mton CO₂e) per year. This may seem a wide variation but considering the average American emits 20 (Mtons CO₂ per year), just getting in this sustainable range should be considered adequate. To assess an individual's own emission rate there are a number of on-line and easy to use calculators. We have tested a number of these and recommend the Oregon or California emission calculators because these ascribe our emissions to our consumption behaviors rather than to the source – this means that the electricity or TV we buy is ascribed to ourselves rather than to the state of

Wyoming generating facility or Asian electronics factory. Test yourself:
<http://www.deq.state.or.us/programs/sustainability/carboncalculator.htm>

When you take this calculator, if you put in details for an entire household, remember to divide your household emissions result by the number of people in your household so you can evaluate your own per capita emissions. Or otherwise treat all the people in your household as a collective unit and multiply the per capita objective mentioned above by the number of in the household.

Now that you have taken the carbon calculator, you will have some idea of your goal to become a world citizen. Let's say that your individual carbon emission was 15.5 tons per year, and you feel committed to become a responsible world citizen. You need to be thinking about reducing your carbon by at least 2/3. So you could return to the carbon calculator and reconfigure your inputs based on changing some behaviors such as how much you drive, fly, foods you eat or comfort costs of your home. It all adds up. To get started however to our goal of responsible world citizen however, many of us are constrained by the structure of our lives. Perhaps we live commute long distances because we circumstances and past decisions put us far from work. We live in a house bigger than we need because of past decisions. We can't change these things instantly but we can change them incrementally. But some things we can change pretty quickly, such as forgoing that winter vacation in a warm climate with a "stay-cation". Maybe we can acquire a much more economical vehicle, although we need to be careful about getting trapped in narrow thinking too; perhaps there is a way to live without a car? Transformational instead of show increments can sometimes leapfrog the painfully slow process of becoming a world citizen.

We assume that you are motivated to do this or you wouldn't even be reading this. But the question may still lurk: why would I want to give up all of my habits and pleasures? There are many reasons but the most common we hear is: to do my leave this planet habitable for future generations and to be an example of responsible behavior.

Which brings us back to carbon offsets. Are they a good decision? Where do I get them? The "are they any good" is addressed here: [link](#). Where to acquire them, a seeming simple question, is remarkably diverse, individual circumstances and preferences are highly variable, and the quality control (validity) measurements are continually evolving and improving. Nonetheless, here is the one vendor we currently like the best:

The Carbon Fund: <http://www.carbonfund.org/individuals>

Also visit their frequently asked questions page: <http://www.carbonfund.org/faqs>

There are other useful suggestions on The Carbon Fund website.

But here's what we don't like: we think they (and most of their peers) seriously underestimate the carbon footprint. Fortunately, the Carbon Fund seems to think so too, because they use a multiplier factor of 2.5 when they buy your offset, which probably makes up for both their calculator's wimpy carbon attribution and occasional but inevitable underperformance of promised carbon capture projects.

Opening the Carbon Fund link above will deliver you to preset options, you will see choices based on your understanding of your carbon emission tonnage or some alternate generic choices. This could be selected from your use of the Oregon Carbon Calculator. Or you could open the "Use Our Calculators" tab" and plug in some of your consumption behaviors – again noting that it doesn't cover everything. These calculator inputs immediately show offset purchase amounts which you can add to a shopping cart and pay for the emissions behavior you have entered. It's pretty easy and it's a start for each of us to pay for the external costs of our emission behavior. And the important thing is that the purchase goes to real-world third party verified carbon reduction investments.

This is a working draft and has intentionally simplified a complex and nuanced topic, subject to criticism of being overly simplified. Please feel to send your feedback:

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Expanded explanations of Offsets: [Link](#)