

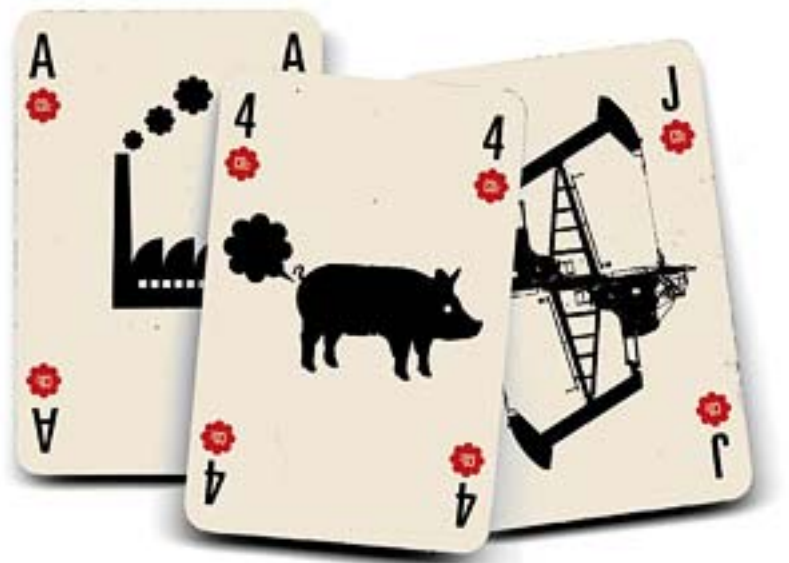
## Carbon Offsetting - Environmentally Sound, or a Scam?

September 24, 2007 · Filed under [Carbon Market](#) by [Andy Chrysostomou](#)



**Editor's Note:** *At Celsius we try to have a reasonably clear message on many important topics. Some areas, however, are a little grey.... Today we have two potentially conflicting posts one after [the other](#) by two different Celsius writers, as carbon offsetting is one such grey area - an issue I've expressed concern over before ([here](#), [here](#) & [here](#) for example). What at face value can seem like a good idea, often appears to have dubious merit when you follow through to the final practical outcomes. We welcome your thoughts on this important topic (we even took [a poll](#) on it a little while ago).*

Here in the UK, the green message is finally getting through to the majority of people. There are many people actively trying to reduce their carbon footprint by making small and 'painless' changes to their lifestyles. Unfortunately, very few people are prepared to make the major changes to their lifestyles that are needed to have a real impact on global warming. A survey by Hyder Consulting found that 86% of respondents were concerned about the environment, but far fewer were actually prepared to do anything about it. Less than 50% were prepared to make any lifestyle changes other than simple ones like turning off lights in empty rooms and turning off electrical appliances when not in use ([The Guardian](#)).



In an effort to help individuals and companies reduce their carbon footprint, a whole new industry has been spawned, that of carbon offsetting. Basically, what this means is you can live your life how you want to, create as much CO<sub>2</sub> as you like, and then you can pay a carbon offsetting company to literally 'offset' your CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. Yet another way for people to not take responsibility for their actions, as long as they can afford to pay that is. The problem with carbon offsetting is, does it actually do anything to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions or is it simply a way for people to salve their guilt and feel better about polluting the planet?

There are many ways carbon offsetting companies claim to offset a client's CO2 emissions. The more common ones are by paying for trees to either be planted or not to be cut down. The problem with this is it can take many years for a tree to grow to maturity, and in that time it can be cut down. Dedicating existing trees to a client does not give any net reduction in CO2 because the trees were already there. Another example of such a scheme is run by a UK based company called Climate Care. They work for a number of companies, like British Airways (BA), so BA passengers can pay Climate Care a fee to offset the emissions from their flights. One method they use is to pay impoverished farmers in India to stop using diesel powered pumps to irrigate their fields and replace them with human-powered treadle pumps. Great in theory, but in practice? Well, what has happened is children are used to work the pumps, creating a new field of child labor problems.

Michael Buick, a spokesperson for Climate Care admitted that children were working the pumps, but he said people had to focus on the benefits to the whole family. He went on to say his group was proud of its scheme, which had led to more than half a million foot treadles being sold, and had won several awards. "If mum is planting and harvesting, the daughters help out. It's just a different way of life. The phrase 'child labor' is emotive. It implies factories, but these are family farms where everyone gets stuck in, watering the crops and taking a turn on the treadle pump," Buick said.



One family to 'benefit' from Climate Care's scheme is the Ram family. Their six year old daughter Sarju and her four young brothers now work flat out for 30 minutes shifts out in the searing sun to pump water into their family field. Granted, it is cheaper for the family to have the children pumping water rather than paying for a diesel pump, but at what cost to the children?

Ashutosh Pandey of Emergent Ventures India, which advises companies on clean technology said:

"The problem is the number of times child labor is involved... It's not being monitored properly. It's not reducing emissions. People are selling their diesel pumps to others who are using them." Sunita Narain, an environmentalist at the Centre for Science and Environment, a Delhi think tank, said: "It won't help global warming if people take more flights to the Seychelles...the rich needed to cut their own emissions by 50% rather than relying on offsets." - [The Times](#)

The effectiveness and overall impact of carbon offsetting needs to be reviewed. Carbon offsetting companies need to be regulated and audited regularly to ensure they are actually causing a measurable reduction in CO2 levels. Carbon offsetting has to actually work, otherwise it is simply an exercise in making money to do nothing more than [assuage people's guilt](#).