



Energy Co2 : Co2 Reduction

Solution or Just Absolution? The Problem with Carbon Offsets

Kevin Smith of Carbon Trade Watch explains why buying carbon offsets is a waste of money.



"The idea of neutralizing emissions is basically nonsense."

Kevin Smith heads the Transnational Institute's Carbon Trade Watch and is the author of "The Carbon Neutral Myth"

What would you say to someone who is considering purchasing carbon offsets?

I would tell them it's really bad idea for all sorts of reasons. The idea of neutralizing emissions is basically nonsense. Once people burn fossil fuels and it's out there in the atmosphere, you can't take that back. It's there as part of the problem, and there's nothing that anyone can do to magically make these emissions disappear.

In addition to this, what these offsets seem to be doing is that they are taking people's impetus to do something about climate change, and commodifying it. They are turning it into this little market transaction that just involves people clicking on the mouse button and paying a nominal sum of money and absolving their consciences.

What do you think of the increasing popularity of offsets?

All this emphasis on individuals and carbon footprints, flying, driving, and so on is really making all the onus on the individual at the expense of looking at climate change in a more systemic way. Seeing where the problems are in our society, and they're distracting attention away from organizing communities and political organizing to create the bigger systemic changes that need to happen if we are going to properly deal with climate change.

If it's only a question of money, I would say to people, don't give your money to carbon offset schemes because a significant portion of that money is going to be taken up by the overhead costs of the company, in terms of their PR budgets, executive salaries, and paying the verifiers and third-party people who are supposed to be checking up on these projects. A very reduced portion of this money actually goes to the project itself.

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What would you tell people to do instead?

If people feel guilty about the way they are using carbon in their lifestyles, and want to give money to something, give that money directly to projects that are doing something in the face of climate change. That could range from some community-based renewable project, or it could be an organization that's campaigning in support of one of the many communities around the world who are resisting the expansion of the fossil fuels industry.

You're basically wasting a big chunk of your money if you're giving it to offset companies rather than giving it directly to someone who is something good about climate change. You can do that without pretending it's neutralizing your emissions or using some fancy website; you can just give the money as a donation.

Don't offsets promote awareness about climate change?

No, I don't think that offsets are useful because they are contributing to awareness about climate change. The fact is, there is already an enormous groundswell of public opinion about the impacts of climate change and the awareness that change needs to be made. That has happened without offset companies. Offset companies are basically riding on the tails of that, and exploiting this rise of consciousness about climate change rather than creating it.

Aren't some offset companies better than others?

I don't see the point of going down the road of trying to distinguish good offsets from bad offsets, or attempts at having some kind of voluntary standards. I think the fundamental concept is flawed on a number of levels, including the fact that all offsets are being used to further the expansion of our dependence on the fossil fuel infrastructure. In addition to that, there are all sorts of methodological problems that are so inherent with how offset credits are being generated. There's so much speculation about these abstract, baseline calculation scenarios that people are essentially making it up as they go along.

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