

## Take carbon, add smoke and mirrors

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I try to be open-minded. So I decided to seriously look into carbon offsets, instead of continuing with my closed-minded criticism.

This is the concept: You figure out what your "carbon footprint" is (according to the figures of the company selling the offsets, of course).

One's carbon footprint is essentially the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions you are "responsible" for, after taking all practicable conservation measures, such as driving some sort of energy efficient vehicle, switching out your light bulbs, and recycling/reusing consumer goods. Then you "purchase" "carbon offsets" from one of the several companies that traffic in such things. These carbon offsets supposedly correlate, through some sort of formula, (again, their formula, and they don't tell you what it is), your carbon footprint to a quantifiable number of offsets necessary to render your living activities "carbon neutral". The carbon offset company then takes your (now their) money and invests it in what they consider to be technologies that have the potential to produce energy through environmentally friendly renewable resources or reduce greenhouse gases in some manner. These investments tend to fall into three areas: 1. windmills; 2. bullshit; and 3. planting trees.

It may not be as ludicrous as it sounds. Windmills (actually, wind turbines is the more accurate term in their current incarnation) have been used as energy converters for centuries. Cows produce methane gas, which, if you believe the carbon offset industry, has a 22 times greater impact on the greenhouse effect than CO<sub>2</sub>. Trees absorb CO<sub>2</sub> and convert it to oxygen.

Let's start with wind turbines. No doubt wind could be the ultimate clean energy source. It's free, every nation has it, and we have plenty of experience harnessing it. Great plusses, all. So clearly beneficial is wind power that, were someone to make it commercially viable, they'd be the Bill Gates of energy. They'd have more sway than the Saudis. We'd all kiss up to such a person, with good reason and I suspect a Nobel Prize would be involved. This option obviously deserves a close look.

How does one go about converting wind to electricity? You buy a wind turbine, or three, and generator. What are wind turbines made of? Steel. Bucket loads of it. How do we get steel? From fossil fuel burning steel mills. I'm sure people far more intelligent than I have figured out how much extra fossil fuel steel must be produced to make sufficient wind turbines for there to be a net reduction in fossil fuel consumption. While I cannot even pretend to know what the precise figure is, it's gotta be a lot since it takes no small number of wind turbines to convert appreciable amounts of energy. The Germans and the Danes are the wunderkinds of wind power. Even they, despite 800 years of trying, obtain only 20% of their energy from wind. While this is inarguably a significant slice, it speaks volumes to the difficulty inherent in this potentially powerful means of energy production.

Now let's talk about bullshit... no, not political rhetoric, but poop of the bovine nature. Surely we have a bunch of that stuff lying around. There are two schools of thought concerning methane. One says to use it in some manner as a means of energy conversion. According to the other, we should convert methane to CO<sub>2</sub> (the theory being that CO<sub>2</sub> contributes far less to the greenhouse effect). It seems to me that if either was a viable alternative we'd be maniacally clamoring for more cow poop research. Apparently it's necessary for me to ask (although I can't imagine why): If methane is such awful stuff that it's preferable to convert it to the positively Satanic CO<sub>2</sub>, why aren't we concentrating on it rather than CO<sub>2</sub>? Where is the anti-methane mass movement? Where do I go to make sure I'm living a methane-neutral lifestyle? Of course, we're not concerned only with manure. Other methane sources include abandoned coalmines. The currently in vogue method of dealing with methane released from abandoned coalmines is to burn it off. That is, set it ablaze to convert it to the apparently relative beneficence of atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>.

Even among environmentalists, planting trees, our final carbon neutralizing method up for review, is questionable at best. Although it is impossible to doubt the value of trees, per se, however, as a means of CO2 reduction the mass planting of them appears to be not only impractical, but potentially recidivist as well. Trees generally take quite a bit of time, usually some multiple of years or even decades, to reach maturity. Then, if something goes awry along the way (like the oh so rare forest fire), they release massive amounts of CO2.

Essentially the system works like this: 1. I purchase carbon offsets to reduce or neutralize my current carbon footprint; 2. The carbon offset company then invests that cash in technologies that may possibly reduce future CO2 emissions; 3. If one of these technologies should pan out, the carbon offset company hits the jackpot; 4. I get a shiny sticker for my Prius (that cost me more than I would have spent on a carbon-spewing vehicle, even taking into account the fuel efficiency), a warm fuzzy feeling, and a sense of moral superiority. At this point, I'm starting to feel like I'm on the losing end of a sophisticated Three Card Monte setup. Since I've never been much of a math maven, I'm having a hard time calculating where Queen Carbon has gone.

What is compelling not just a few people to actively participate in this carbon-offset con? Sheer gullibility? Obtuseness? Sincere desire to save humanity? I do not think it is solely attributable to any of these pat explanations (although some may apply to an extent). I think it is an overwhelming innate imperative to control the uncontrollable. Rather than resign themselves to passive acceptance they prefer action &ndash; even if that action is illogical and offers little in the way of a practical solution. This is essentially what we all want: To be the drivers of our own destiny. Passive acceptance of perceived calamity is not something Americans do well. Our culture prizes individual initiative. (Just DO something already!) Any action, of whatever dubious value, enables us to have at least the illusion of control. Carbon-offset credits offer a particularly specious solution to how we feel about ourselves; sadly, however, it appears that this industry provides little beyond the illusion of action.

Aside from the Kumbaya-earthmother-tree-hugger sticker, I'm wondering why I should hand over my well earned sheckles to somebody else to invest in planet friendly technologies when I can do that myself. Plus, I'd get to make my own choices about where my money is going. Stickers are cheap; and that begs another question... were the stickers ethically made... don't get me started on that one...

Note: Author does not own a Prius, has never owned a Prius, and does not plan on ever owning one. It's an illustrative reference only.