

Offsetting the Damage Done

Despite my best efforts, I do not live a carbon-neutral life. Despite public-relation campaigns touting an eco-conscious approach to business, most small and large companies are still far from carbon neutrality. We may recognize that there is an environmental cost to our energy-rich lifestyles and are sincerely working to curb our carbon emissions, but we are not yet at carbon-neutrality. Is there a way to atone for my contributions to global warming? Is there a way to compensate for the CO₂ emissions I can't yet eliminate? Is there a way, for example, to assuage my carbon guilt when I fly cross-country for a conference or to visit family?

Clean, renewable energy is becoming more available, but we are not yet completely free of fossil fuel technology. For this reason, individuals and corporations have turned to carbon offsets to mitigate the effects of the greenhouse gas emissions we can't avoid. Investing in carbon offset programs does not reduce our carbon footprint, but can compensate for our carbon emissions by supporting environmental projects that remove CO₂ from the atmosphere or incentivize others (often poorer countries) to lower their emissions. Because trees naturally remove carbon from the atmosphere and sequester it in their biomass, carbon offsetting most often involves reforestation projects or preventing trees from being harvested.

The Dark Side of Carbon Offsets

Carbon offsetting is a bookkeeping approach to reducing global warming. In theory, by investing in programs to decrease atmospheric carbon, we can zero out our own emissions. Many companies are working toward a net zero carbon standard, and use carbon offsets to compensate for their emissions until that goal is reached. Critics, however, have pointed out that, some companies find it cheaper to buy offsets rather than make serious efforts to curb their own emissions—a strategy that commodifies nature and weakens our motivation to move toward clean and renewable energy. Offering carbon offsets as long-term solutions to our climate crisis is misguided at best because we are currently emitting far more CO₂ than we can offset (there is a limit to the number of trees we can plant for example). At worse it becomes a form of 'greenwashing'—giving false and misleading information about a company's positive environmental impact.

Making Carbon Offsets Work

When done properly, investing in sustainable environmental projects can offset the effects of damaging CO₂ emissions as we work towards a goal of zero emissions. Renewable energy programs, energy efficiency improvements, and carbon sequestration programs are all effective offset strategies when carried out appropriately.

- **Carbon offsets must work in conjunction with governmental and corporate efforts.** (Offsets are beneficial when they supplement government policies and business incentives aimed at reaching net zero carbon emissions.)
 - **Vote** for politicians committed to combating global warming.
 - **Support businesses** that are seriously working toward net zero carbon standards.

- **Carbon offsets must be in addition to other actions.** (Offsets are beneficial when they do more than what is already being done to curb emissions.)
- **Carbon offsets must be permanent.** (Limiting global warming requires that offsets cannot be temporary fixes. It takes 10-20 years for a reforested area to become a carbon sink, If we replant a forest only to have it harvested or destroyed by fire in the decades to come, we have accomplished little and may have made the situation worse.)
- **Carbon offsets must be verified.** (Deceptive schemes can undermine our well-intentioned goals. Verifying carbon offset programs is essential to combating global warming. Some offset validation companies and agencies are listed below.)
 - **The Verified Carbon Standard (VCS, [Verra](#))** establishes requirements for greenhouse gas emissions and removal.
 - **The Climate Action Reserve ([CAR](#))** oversees independent third-party verification bodies.
 - **The [Gold Standard](#)** program, open to any non-government community-based organization, ensures that carbon credits are verifiable and that projects make measurable contributions to sustainable development.
 - **The American Carbon Registry ([ACR](#))** oversees verification of a variety of carbon offset projects in the voluntary carbon market.
- **Carbon offsets must work for you.** (Many companies sell carbon offsets, but which best addresses your situation? The [Treehugger](#) site offers advice for environmentally sustainable living, and have listed their 2023 choice for the best carbon offset programs.)
 - **Best Overall:** [NativeEnergy](#)
 - **Best Air Travel:** [Sustainable Travel International](#)
 - **Best Events:** [TerraPass](#)
 - **Best Commute:** [Clear](#)
 - **Best Home:** [myclimate](#)
 - **Best Corporate:** [3Degrees](#)