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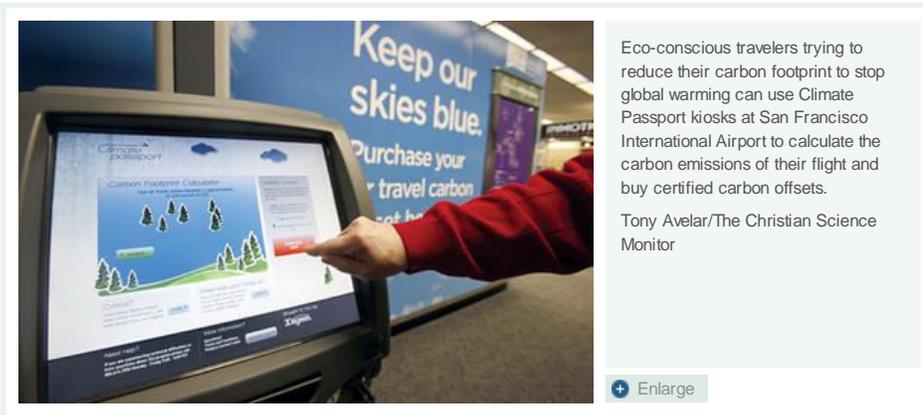
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# Buying carbon offsets may ease eco-guilt but not global warming

Voluntary carbon offsets are a 'Wild West' market ripe for fraud, exaggeration, and poorly run projects that probably do little to ease global warming.

By Doug Struck, *Correspondent* / April 20, 2010

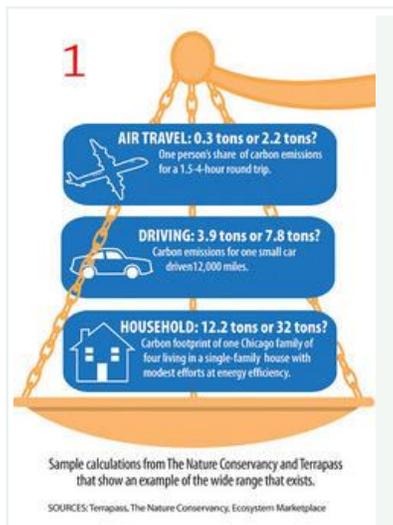


Eco-conscious travelers trying to reduce their carbon footprint to stop global warming can use Climate Passport kiosks at San Francisco International Airport to calculate the carbon emissions of their flight and buy certified carbon offsets.

Tony Avelar/The Christian Science Monitor

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A forest was supposed to be here, inhaling carbon dioxide. But the fields are as empty as the promises of the carbon offsets that promoters said would help negate global warming with thousands of new trees near this Hungarian village.



Sources: Terrapass, The Nature Conservancy, Ecosystem Marketplace Research: Leigh Montgomery, Elizabeth Ryan, and Tyler Maltbie Rich Clabaugh/Staff

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An investigation by The Christian Science Monitor and the New England Center for Investigative Reporting has found that individuals and businesses who are feeding a \$700 million global market in offsets are often buying vague promises instead of the reductions in greenhouse gases they expect.

They are buying into projects that are never completed, or paying for ones that would have been done anyhow, the investigation found. Their purchases are feeding middlemen and promoters seeking profits from green schemes that range from selling protection for existing trees to the promise of planting new ones that never thrive. In some cases, the offsets have consequences that their purchasers never foresaw, such as erecting windmills that force poor people off their farms.

Carbon offsets are the environmental equivalent of financial derivatives: complex, unregulated, unchecked and – in many cases – not worth their price.

And often, those who get the “green credits” thinking their own carbon emissions have been offset, are fooled. The Vatican was among them.

Cardinal Paul Poupard stood for the flash of cameras in the Vatican in the summer of 2007, beneath an image of Jesus healing a blind man, and accepted a gold-framed certificate declaring the papal city the “first carbon-neutral sovereign state.”

By negating all the Vatican's 2007 greenhouse-gas emissions with carbon offsets presented to the Holy See by the company

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KlimaFa, "the Vatican will do its small part in contributing to the elimination of polluting emissions ... threatening the survival of this planet," the cardinal proclaimed.

No one was happier about it than Kiss Lajos. The stubby 65-year-old has presided as mayor of the scratch-poor farming village of Tiszakeszi in the Hungarian plains since the days of the Soviets.

For his constituents, who scavenge brush along the Tisza River for their home fires, the ceremony in the Vatican offered rare hope: The Hungarian company KlimaFa promised to hire hundreds of workers to plant thousands of trees near their village to suck up carbon on behalf of the Vatican.

It did not happen.

KlimaFa has not planted a tree on what it ambitiously dubbed "the Vatican Forest" in the Tiszakeszi countryside, even as the California promoter who started the company used the publicity to sell offsets on the Internet.

The Hungarian government, initially a cheerleader of the project, now does not want to talk about it. The company's president in Budapest backed out of an interview. The greenhouse gases produced by the cars and furnaces and lights of the papal apartments in the Vatican were not neutralized by the offsets. And a Vatican spokesman says "the case is being studied to take legal action in order to defend the

Vatican's reputation."

"They were duped," says Jutta Kill, an analyst for FERN (Forests and European Union Resource Network), which tracks environmental scams. And the Vatican was hardly alone.

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