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Getting Started With Carbon Offsets

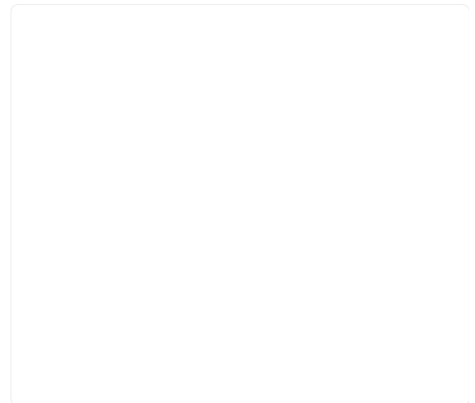


By [Gemma Alexander](#)

© JUN 14, 2021 [carbon emissions, carbon offsets](#)

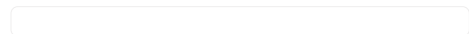
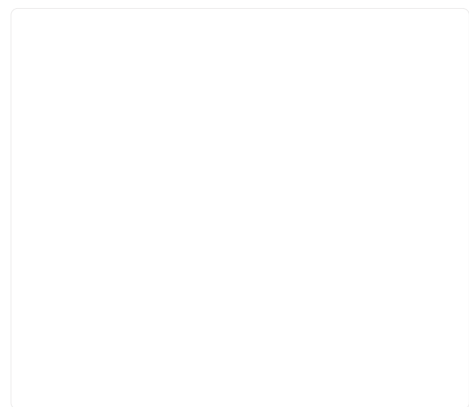


You do your best to live lightly on the planet, but some [greenhouse gas emissions](#) are inevitable. When you have already become as energy-efficient as you can, and the energy you use is as sustainable as you can get it, you turn to carbon offsets. The final step in the hierarchy towards achieving net-zero energy, carbon offsets are still among the least understood environmental strategies. This confusing, often overrated approach can be a valuable tool for shrinking your carbon footprint. But only if you learn how to use it properly.



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Carbon Offsets

In principle, carbon offsets are simple. Consumers who cannot avoid carbon emissions from a particular activity (for example, a necessary flight) pay money towards an environmental project that will eliminate that amount of carbon emissions elsewhere (for example, planting trees).

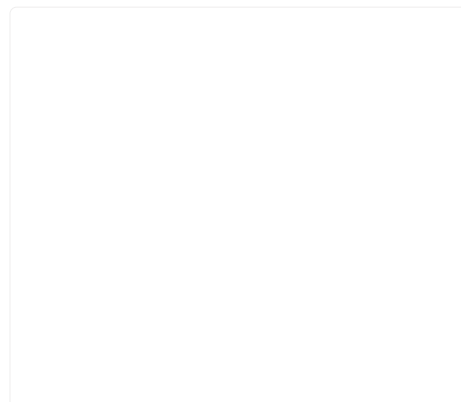
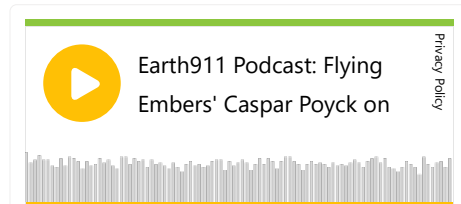
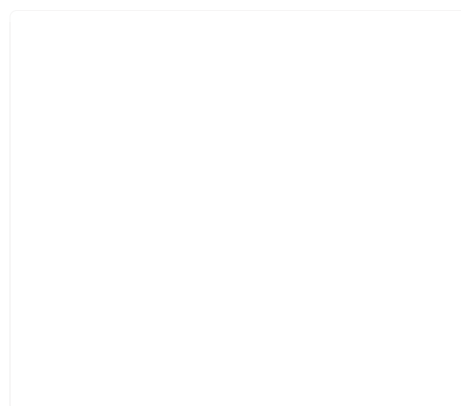
In practice, carbon offsets are much more complicated. Different carbon emissions calculators produce dramatically different results. You need to choose between true carbon offsets or [renewable energy credits](#). Some offset programs prioritize the prevention of emissions, while others attempt to actually remove carbon from the atmosphere. The [two approaches](#) have different costs and calculation challenges. The [specific projects](#) range from tree planting to sustainable energy and even rural development. Pricing is inconsistent, depending not only on the program but also the location and type of project.

Carbon Controversy

Carbon offset programs have been the subject of much [controversy](#). They are not regulated; [ineffective](#) and even spurious projects are [well documented](#). Even some of the most [respectable organizations' programs](#), like the United Nations' REDD+ program or the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism have failed to deliver on promises. A 2015 paper found that actively cutting pollution would have reduced global emissions by [600 million tons](#) more than purchasing offsets.

There is also the risk known as "moral hazard." This is where the availability of offsets is used to justify additional emissions. Moral hazard results in your purchase of a plane ticket when you otherwise would have stayed home. In China, some businesses [deliberately increased](#) their greenhouse gas emissions in order to be paid to reduce them again.

There are several major certification systems, including [American Carbon Registry](#), [Climate Action Reserve](#), [Gold Standard](#), [Plan Vivo](#), and [Verra](#). But even the certifiers require scrutiny; standards vary widely and some certifiers take up to 20% of your donation in operation costs. Gold Standard (which produces a [consumer's guide](#)) and Verra's Verified Carbon Standard seem to be the most trusted.



How To Choose

Historically, carbon offsets have been most popular for offsetting travel, and many programs are specifically designed around [air travel](#). But consumers are applying the concept to a growing list of activities where carbon emissions are unavoidable.

With dozens of programs to choose from, and a spotty industry-wide record, carbon offset programs require some research. If you want your offset purchases to be more than just a feel-good exercise, scrutinize programs to ensure they are:

Measurable

Although any project that sequesters or reduces carbon emissions is valuable, to work as an offset, it must be quantifiable. The purpose of carbon offsets is to balance the environmental books, eliminating carbon equal to the amount that is inevitably produced.

Independently Verified

Verification of environmental claims is always a good idea. But in an unregulated field rife with [greenwashing](#), third-party verification is especially important.

Permanent

Although tree-planting is one of the most intuitive strategies for carbon sequestration, recent wildfires have proven that long-term gains made through forestry can be suddenly lost. Even worse, reforestation projects sponsored by respected offset programs have actually led to [tree cover decreases](#). Programs should have mitigation measures to reduce natural disturbance risks and [buffer reserves](#) to address the risk of reversals.

Additional

A carbon offset is [additional](#) if it would not have taken place without the finance provided by the sale of credits. A 2016 European Union [study](#) found that 85% of offset projects did not depend on the purchase of offsets, meaning that the purchase of those credits did not actually eliminate any carbon emissions.

DIY Offsets

You can practice your own [carbon sequestration](#), but unless you own *a lot* of land, that approach won't be enough. DIY carbon offsetting is possible, though, and may even be preferable to many offset programs. Use one of the many [online carbon calculators](#) to determine how much you want to offset, and then donate directly to the tree-planting or clean energy project of your choice. Many deserving small nonprofits are overlooked by big offset programs.

Carbon Offset Programs

There are too many programs to review them all, but here are a few well-respected options listed alphabetically.

Atmosfair

Travel is the activity that individual consumers are most likely to choose to offset. [Atmosfair](#) is a German nonprofit that promotes, develops, and finances renewable energy to offset air travel.

Native Energy

Rated [best overall](#) by Investopedia, [Native Energy](#) is a [B Corp Certified](#) partner to corporations. They sell carbon offsets to support regenerative agriculture and community-scale projects that strengthen ranching communities, reduce [scope 3 emissions](#), preserve biodiversity, and improve beef and leather supply chains. They even coordinate site visits for buyers to see their projects.

myclimate

With [myclimate](#), you can calculate and offset a variety of lifestyle components, including your commute, your vacations, and your home by donating directly to specific projects through their website.

Sustainable Travel International

[Sustainable Travel International](#), a top provider listed by [Conserve Energy Future](#), works to make tourism sustainable by protecting vulnerable travel destinations.

Terrapass

[Terrapass](#) has a flawed history but has made improvements and has been [recommended](#) by Earth911. They provide carbon calculators for a variety of activities, from special events to product shipping. Their offset projects take place around the world and include clean energy, land gas capture,

and farm power.

Gold Standard

If researching a project and then researching the organization that verifies it is too burdensome, you can purchase offsets directly from the verifying body. Gold Standard [sells project-specific offsets](#) on their website. Verra does not sell offsets directly to individuals, but their registry is [searchable](#) by project type.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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