

Carbon offset schemes – do they work?

Grand carbon offset schemes which ‘compensate’ for carbon ‘gluttony’ by investing in wind farms or reforestation projects across the globe have failed because of the remote nature of the schemes being funded.

To address this, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) launched a 12-month study to investigate whether carbon offsetting in the aviation industry would work at a local level. The study was headed by MMU’s Dr Paul Hxxxxx and comprised three elements: a review of offset literature; a review of various offset schemes provided internationally; and a survey of passengers at Manchester Airport.

The findings uncovered a lack of transparency among those providing offset schemes in areas such as how the offset levy was calculated, and where the money raised was being invested. This undermines the credibility of offset schemes as a whole – a factor which was further exacerbated by the variance in offset charges which ranged from 31 pence on a short-haul flight, right up to £12.95!

Results from the 60 passengers surveyed at Manchester Airport indicated they would be willing to pay a voluntary offset fee if it benefited local communities directly affected by airport operations.

Interestingly, two-thirds of respondents had heard of offsetting, but only a tenth had done anything about it!

Overall, there were high levels of uncertainty among the passengers about most aspects of carbon offsetting. General observations to arise from the survey were that people lacked awareness of the consequences of their actions; they didn't know what their carbon offset payments should be; and they needed to be convinced that they could make a difference.

Initial conclusions are that voluntary carbon offset schemes - even at a local level – would have very little uptake unless there were improvements in the consistency and transparency of fees payable. Without a massive public awareness campaign, anything short of mandatory offset schemes would seem likely to fail.

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