

# SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

## A TRAVELERS' GUIDE TO LOW CARBON TRAVEL

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Reducing your carbon footprint while traveling is a way to show your concern for the environment
  - There are many easy steps travelers can take to reduce their footprint while traveling
  - Carbon offsets can help reduce your carbon footprint when generating greenhouse gases cannot be avoided.
  - Carbon offsets can be a relatively low-cost travel expense, but it is important to ensure you are using a reputable provider.
  - Use your example and influence to encourage system change, including the use of renewable energy, across the tourism system.
- 

### CARBON AND WHY YOUR FOOTPRINT MATTERS

Climate change is one of the greatest challenges facing our planet. Tourism accounts for approximately 8%<sup>1</sup> of all emissions that cause climate change. As travelers, we must work together to keep our planet, and destinations healthy for the communities that live there and for future travelers visiting these locations.

### SORTING THROUGH THE TERMS

There are a lot of buzzwords and technical jargon in discussions about climate change. Our first step is to look at what some of those terms mean. **Greenhouse Gases (GHG)** are gases that contribute to climate change. The most common GHG is carbon dioxide, which is created when we use hydrocarbon fuels like gasoline. Each of us causes carbon, and other GHGs, to be released into the atmosphere as we go about our daily lives, and that contribution is called our “**carbon footprint.**” Of course, when you travel, you add to your carbon footprint. To fight climate change, many people are working to reduce their carbon footprint, even when traveling. People and businesses are **carbon neutral** when they are not adding carbon to or removing it from the atmosphere. Achieving carbon neutrality is difficult, and so some travelers look to **carbon offsets.**

### START BY MEASURING YOUR FOOTPRINT

A great place to start is to measure your carbon footprint and find out how much carbon you use. There are many choices to find a carbon footprint “calculator” on the internet to calculate

---

<sup>1</sup> UNWTO, & UNEP. (2008). *Climate Change and Tourism – Responding to Global Challenges*. Retrieved from <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/abs/10.18111/9789284412341>

your emissions. These calculators will let you know how much carbon you emitted during your vacation. By understanding how big your footprint is, you can see how much your lifestyle impacts the environment.

## WAYS TO REDUCE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT

Offsetting is a great way to gain carbon neutrality, but this is not the only way to reduce your carbon footprint. Here are some steps you can take to cut back on carbon.

- **Reducing food waste:** An estimated one-third of all food produced for human consumption is wasted. When traveling, we may splurge on food by asking for more than we need, only to toss our leftovers from buffets and restaurants. On your next vacation, watch your portions and only buy as much food as you will eat.

- **Slow down your travel:** Slow travel is a great way to be sustainable while still enjoying your destination. One longer vacation can save on transportation emissions caused by flying or driving on multiple trips throughout the year. Plus, why only skim the surface of many activities when you can take time to really enjoy a few activities? Slowing down and getting to know local people will give your vacation a more meaningful experience.



Image by Alex Azabache on Unsplash

- **Choosing fuel-efficient transportation:** There are many ways to choose energy-efficient transportation. Public transportation is a great way to visit locations without emitting more GHGs. If you have to rent a vehicle, request an electric car if they have any instead of larger vehicles that produce more emissions. Biking or walking around are also alternatives for efficient transportation.

- **Buying local:** Shopping local is great for a variety of reasons. Purchasing local food and souvenirs supports the community you are traveling to by giving money back to farmers and vendors from the area. It also reduces

emissions produced because you won't be buying products that travel from far away, often requiring even more plastic and packaging to ship.

- **Be mindful when making purchases:** Take time to think about souvenir purchases and avoid items that will end up in someone's junk draw or landfill. When traveling, consider leaving these items behind and finding gifts that capture your destination's unique heritage and culture. Your purchases make a difference – spend wisely.
- **Tell people about your choices:** While individual behaviors are important, changing the system will make real change. By telling people what you are doing to reduce your carbon footprint, you are raising awareness of the issue. Travel providers and their suppliers will get the message. When travelers and travel companies work together to reduce GHG – real change can happen.

## CARBON OFFSETTING TO REDUCE YOUR CARBON FOOTPRINT WHILE TRAVELING.

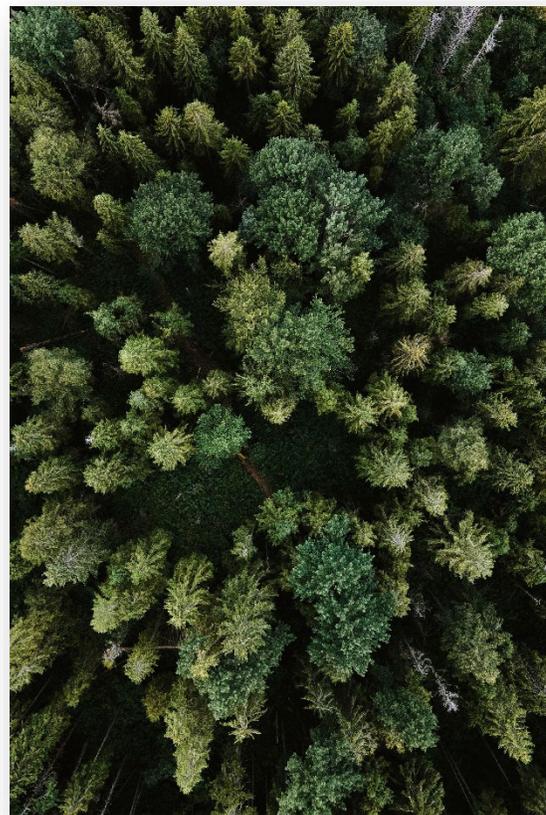
### What are carbon offsets?

Carbon offsets support projects that reduce GHGs, such as planting trees or building renewable energy sources. As a traveler, you can buy a carbon offset certificate that shows you have supported a part of the project that will reduce as much carbon as you produced when you took the trip. Some carbon offset companies will even allow you to choose the projects that are most meaningful to you. Even though your travels create carbon, you are contributing to a project that reduces carbon by paying for carbon offsets.

### How to choose a carbon offset company

Once you've chosen to offset your carbon, the next challenge is selecting a reputable company. Companies that provide carbon offsets are unregulated, and so it is worthwhile doing some homework. Here are a couple of important questions to consider if you are thinking about buying carbon offsets:

- **Do these programs reduce carbon?** Make sure that the projects the carbon offset company is promoting reduce carbon.
- **Do they align with your values?** One of the first factors to consider is what project you want to fund. Carbon offset companies will have different projects their funding goes to, so you have a variety to choose from. You can put your money toward reforestation, wastewater treatment, funding renewable energy activities, and many more. Emission reduction initiatives allow you to reduce GHGs from travel and accommodations by putting your money toward programs you share values with while healing the planet, too.
- **Are they third-party authenticated?** Many offsets are verified by third parties, such as SCS Global Services. These companies analyze and verify the details from projects to assure funders and buyers that these offsets are legitimate.



*Image by Olena Sergienko on Unsplash*

Getting Started: Where can I get them and how expensive are they?



Image by Dmitry Dreyer on Unsplash

Carbon offsetting does not have to break your wallet. On average, offsets only cost \$5 for every 1,000 pounds of carbon emissions produced.

Carbon footprint calculators show that a roundtrip flight from New York City to Los Angeles averages 3,815 pounds of CO<sup>2</sup>. With \$5 costs for every 1,000 pounds, the cost to offset the trip would be less than \$20. Even more, a roundtrip flight from New York

City to Hong Kong with one layover would produce 11,000 pounds of CO<sup>2</sup>, which would only cost \$55 for offsetting.

### IS IT WORTH THE BOTHER?

Reducing your carbon footprint is a good way to show your commitment to climate change action. If the billions of people traveling each year reduce their carbon footprint, it will help. But it's important to remember, carbon offsetting isn't the solution to climate change.

Even more importantly, by showing your commitment, you can help create change across the entire tourism system and beyond. Significant reductions in GHG require changes in how we generate energy, how we build, and transportation. Encouraging suppliers of these products and services to adopt new low-carbon technologies is a great way to promote system change.

### LINKS TO MORE INFORMATION

#### Learn more about carbon offsetting.

- [Carbon Offset Verification](#)
- [Terrapass: Where Your Money Goes](#)

#### Calculate your carbon footprint.

- [What is a Carbon Footprint](#)
- [Carbon Footprint Calculator](#)

#### Carbon Offset companies.

- [15 of the Best and Popular US Carbon Offsetting Providers](#)
- [Sustainable Travel International – Offsetting](#)
- [Terrapass – Purchasing Offsets](#)

## KEY GSTC CRITERIA AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS)



GSTC D2.0 A4: **Enterprise engagement and sustainability standards**



**Prepared by:**  
Madison McConnell  
Dr. Jonathon Day

**Prepared for:**

Destination  
Stewardship  
Center



Released: June 2021



School of Hospitality and  
Tourism Management

**ST&RT Lab**  
SUSTAINABLE TOURISM & RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL