

So You Think You Don't Offset

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SO YOU THINK YOU DON'T OFFSET

→ Every Sunday night, like every other householder in our neighborhood, I collect our waste paper, cans, bottles and plastic and put them out on the street outside our house. On Monday morning a local government truck comes by and collects it for recycling. I pay for this service through my taxes. Apart from some gripes about the efficiency of the service, few local people complain about it. And only a few extremists who tend to oppose government action in all its forms object to the recycling on principle.

In essence, recycling is a form of offsetting. I am paying someone else to deal with waste products of my lifestyle. Apart from my own conscience and the small chore of actually collecting together the paper, bottles, etc., and putting them on the street, there is little incentive or pressure on me not to accumulate the waste. Sure, there is plenty of encouragement to recycle, but no one harangues me for not cutting down on the newspapers I read, or suggests I should avoid buying my cat food in cans, or demands I should buy beer by the barrel to avoid so many glass bottles.

Much the same goes for our household's regular garbage or wastewater. Apart from occasional urging from environmental groups that I turn the tap off or consume less, or at least convert to products whose waste will end up in the recycling rather than landfill, paying through my taxes for the removal and disposal of our waste is uncontroversial.

This practice of paying others to deal with our waste in some remote place is an integral aspect of our society today. It does not cause moral outrage. No one demands that we should stop using these services, or that overnight we can eliminate the waste from our lifestyles. There is general agreement that a level of waste is inevitable, and that it's OK to have others deal with it.

Carbon is really just another form of household waste. However, it has several characteristics that make it appear different. For a start, it is invisible. Often it is produced off-site – at the power station that is generating our electricity, for example – and not actually in our homes. And its impact is only seen at the end of a long causal chain – global warming that results from the accumulation of human-produced greenhouse gases. In the end, carbon is simply another waste product of our current lifestyles – although undoubtedly a more dangerous one.

The problem with carbon is that we can't gather it and put it in a jar on the street for weekly collection. Meanwhile, we are, quite rightly, under increasing pressure to reduce our carbon production by being more energy efficient, buying less carbon-intensive goods, etc. However, for the moment, all but a handful of

households can operate without producing some level of carbon waste.

But in this case, the idea of paying someone else to remove and deal with it has become highly controversial.

Carbon offsetting amounts to paying someone to manage our carbon waste for us. The process is less direct than our weekly garbage and recycling collection. The offsetter cannot identify the particular cloud of carbon we are responsible for. However, because the impact of greenhouse gases are spread globally, the offsetter can capture or reduce an equivalent amount somewhere else to neutralize our output.

Morally, what is the difference in doing this compared with paying taxes to have our wastewater treated, or our cans and bottles collected and recycled? It's hard to see the distinction, yet carbon offsetting arouses a powerful emotional reaction in many people.

Opponents claim that carbon offsetting simply encourages people to indulge in environmentally unfriendly lifestyles. It does nothing to encourage us to use energy more efficiently round the home, or otherwise reduce our carbon footprint, they say. It allows us to indulge our wasteful lifestyles while salving our consciences.

Yet no one makes this claim for recycling, or wastewater treatment. If we were denied these services, we would be forced to make other arrangements. I would probably find another source of cat food than cans, and buy a returnable barrel of beer instead of bottles. I'd be forced to install a system that recycled my wastewater.

Over time, we can all work towards these things. It will be easier when the cost of water recycling systems comes down, or when all packaging of goods is recyclable. In the same way, it will be easier to reduce our carbon footprints when the cost of solar or geothermal heating systems comes down, or when our computers require less electricity, or when renewable energy is more widely available.

In the meantime, provided we are as active in attempting to reduce our carbon as we are our general household waste, what's the difference between paying taxes for garbage and recycling collection and contributing to a carbon offset scheme?

ABOUT ZEROFOOTPRINT

→ Zerofootprint is a socially responsible enterprise whose mission is to apply technology, design and risk management to the massive reduction of our environmental footprint. We operate both in the for-profit and charitable domains through two entities, Zerofootprint Software and Zerofootprint Foundation using shared technology.