

From Dr. Thomas Doherty: How to Use Carbon Offsets

Here is some information about Carbon Offsets and how to use them in your personal strategy to limit your climate change impacts. I have used carbon offsets to mitigate the environmental impacts of my travel for many years. I offset all my air flights and also, once per year, my auto miles. Think of carbon offsets as one useful tool among many things we can do to be more sustainable. If you are forced to create emissions from activities like air travel, offsetting gives you a concrete action to take. This also helps alleviate troubling feelings that arise from contributing to climate change problems.

The term “carbon offset” is shorthand for efforts to compensate for a person or organization’s CO₂ emissions such as from flying, driving or operating their home. A *carbon offset* can be (1) a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, or (2) an increase in carbon storage (e.g., through land restoration or the planting of trees) that is used to compensate for emissions that occur elsewhere.

Because greenhouse gases mix globally in the atmosphere, it does not matter where exactly they are reduced. From a climate change perspective, the effects are the same if a person or organization: (a) ceases an emission-causing activity; or (b) enables an equivalent emission-reducing activity somewhere else in the world.

Keep in mind I can also offset something after the fact, as I do with my auto emissions at the end of each year, and I can offset something that happened in the past, like a flight I made months earlier. Or, I can book flights and offset them at that time.

The UR³OK" Approach

When I use offsets and advise people I work with, I situate the use of offsets in a larger strategy I call "UR³OK" (pronounced “You are OK,” or with young people, “You Rock.”) This process includes:

1. **Understand:** Do my best to understand my personal carbon and environmental impacts, and my options amid the larger social and political context I am a part of.
2. Apply the familiar **Three R’s:** “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” as much as possible. And add new “R’s” like “Refuse, Resist, Revision,” etc.
3. **Offset** the impacts I can't reduce or refuse.
4. Be **Kind** to myself and others in the process. We are often limited in our pro-environmental actions due to societal barriers and lack of control or resources. We need to do what we can with what we have.

Carbon Offset Resources:

Basic Info: [What are Carbon Offsets?](#)

[More Detailed Carbon Offset Guide from Stockholm Environmental Institute](#)

[How to judge offset programs](#)

Examples of programs individuals can use:

[Tree Hugger: The 6 Best Carbon Offset Programs of 2023](#)

[Impactful Ninja: 9 Best Carbon Offsets for Families \(Complete 2023 List\)](#)

Flight Calculator example: [Clear Flight Calculator](#)

Dr. Thomas Doherty

Dr. Thomas Doherty is a psychologist based in Portland, Oregon who has a specialty addressing people's concerns about environmental issues and climate change. His publications include the groundbreaking paper "[The Psychological Impacts of Global Climate Change](#)"-- cited over 850 times. Thomas is a fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and founded one of the first environmentally-focused [training programs](#) for mental health counselors in the US at Lewis & Clark Graduate School. He is originally from Buffalo, New York. Dr Thomas Doherty's work has been featured in publications like the New York Times. He also co-hosts the [Climate Change and Happiness](#) podcast. You can learn more about Dr. Thomas Doherty and his [trainings](#) for mental health professionals at his [website](#).