



Q&A: DOUG LANSKY ON THE EFFICACY OF CARBON OFFSETTING SCHEMES

With the threats of climate change mounting, the travel industry is facing more challenges than it has solutions for.

While some companies are making valiant efforts to **combat global warming**, many have also been accused of “greenwashing” – or marketing themselves as environmentally conscious without solid evidence to back up their claims.

The **efficacy of carbon offsetting**, particularly in aviation, is one area that’s been called into question. For one, it “just sounds too good to be true,” says destination management and tourism specialist Doug Lansky.

Below, Lansky shares his views on the practice, unpacks why travel companies continue to introduce offsetting schemes and explains how technology can power sustainability efforts.

You said on **LinkedIn**: “For a long time I’ve been talking about the feasibility of using carbon offsets to help make the travel industry greener... that it’s a bit like asking your butler to go jogging for you because you don’t have the energy yourself.” – can you explain what you mean by that?

The whole thing [with carbon offsets] just sounds a little too good to be true. A bit like miracle diet pills. The idea is that I'm going to fly overseas on business class and some guy on the other side of the world is going to throw a few plants into the back of his solar-powered Tesla and drive them out to the edge of the forest and plant them so that I can fall asleep with a CO2-guilt-free conscience in my lay-flat seat? Yeah, right (eye-rolling emoji!).

Why do travel companies continue to use offsets to support net-zero emissions targets, when research shows offsets don't reliably reduce emissions? Willful ignorance? Cheaper option?

Let's be honest: It's a lot of investigative work to look into this stuff. I've seen a few TV news programs try to sink their journalistic teeth into this subject and even for them with all their resources, it's not easy. The short answer is that it's a combination of eco-marketing on the part of the company and willful ignorance on the part of both the company and the consumer. Put these together and you get a powerful greenwashing cocktail.

From the company's perspective as well as the consumer perspective, the model is extremely tempting: "So we can just do the same stuff we've been doing and we pay a tiny offset fee and then everything we're doing becomes carbon-neutral and we can feel good about that"? What's not to like? Except for the minor detail that the whole thing is a bit of a scam.

Yes, there are exceptions ... there are some legit programs. But the bulk of the programs are already tied to hotels and airlines and baked into the price you pay and who really has time to investigate them all? And it's not so offensive, so are we really going to complain as customers when we're checking into our flight or our hotel while we're trying to enjoy our trip? And even if we did, it's not like the check-in desk person would be able to address the concerns.

Should the onus even be placed on the consumer, or is it a corporation's responsibility reduce emissions?

Maybe neither. Maybe there should be a regulatory body that makes the playing field fair, sort of like the Food and Drug Administration. The pharmaceutical companies may complain it takes time to get their new medications to market, but before the FDA, there were an awful lot of

people dying from bogus medication and plenty of snake-oil salesmen pedaling crazy concoctions and very low consumer confidence. That's sort of where we are now with offsets.

Can you give examples of travel companies that are biggest offenders when it comes to greenwashing?

I don't know that I want to jump into that shark tank. Let's just put it this way - airlines, cruise ships, hotels, taxis, ferries and trains all pollute. That is also to say that we all pollute. There are some things that would obviously cause less pollution, like flying less, using more fuel-efficient planes (and ships and cars), using bio-degradable plates and cutlery, installing water-saving showers and solar panels and many other initiatives you're likely familiar with.

But either instead of doing those, or in addition to some of those, they may want to be able to cloak themselves in "carbon-neutral" or "net-zero emissions" marketing. That is likely based on some creative math or creative interpretations of environmental practices.

What will it take to set standards at scale in travel?

Voluntary offsetting is now a \$2 billion industry, and for many of them, such standards would put their livelihood at risk, so that sounds like it will be an uphill battle.

What are some examples of offsets doing more harm than good?

The basic premise for many of the companies offering these offset services is that they are helping create value-added decisions. That is to say, if someone is planning to chop down a tree and they pay them to not do it, then that's something that wouldn't have happened on its own. But this is one of the ways it gets very shady. In many instances, the companies are paying people to conserve something that would have been conserved anyway. So there's really no value-add.

Looking beyond offsets, what methods are most effective for travel companies to reduce their carbon footprint?

I think a great place to start is transparency. For example, let's say you use your favorite OTA to book a flight from New York to Miami. On that day, let's say there are 20 flights that pop up. Even within your same basic time

window and price range, there may be several. Wouldn't it be nice to see the most eco-friendly flight identified.

That means, for starters, it's a direct flight and has the most fuel-efficient plane of all those flights. If there are more than one that meet that criteria, it moves down the list: which flight is using synthetic fuels, bio-degradable cutlery, etc. That way we are voting with our wallet and rewarding the airlines who keep trying to be the most eco. We could be doing the same with hotels as well.

How else can technology support sustainability efforts?

We've seen electric and bike-powered taxis pop up. There are now special **showers** available that recycle the water immediately and allow people to shower comfortably with just 10% of the normal amount of water. There are sensors that shut off the air-conditioning in hotel rooms when the balcony door is opened and special washing machines that reduce water consumption while washing sheets and towels.

For travel startups, how should they think about building their business sustainably from day one?

It's not hard to see that sustainability is where things are going. There's a strong precedent for companies putting sustainability at the core of their business model in clothing, toys, shoes, furniture and many sectors. Why not follow that lead more with travel? We're seeing some hotels leading the way, like the **Bucuti & Tara Beach Resort** in Aruba. The industry would benefit enormously from more stakeholders jumping on that bandwagon in a genuine way, with either little or no dependence on offsetting.