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Carbon Offsets – A Cure for an Overindulgent Life Style?

By Nancy Reigel

Okay, confession time. You have not seen my personal “eco-footprint” listed in any of the MountainKeeping columns that have addressed that subject. Did I fill out the questionnaire and get it scored? Absolutely! But when I saw my score – 37 – I was so mortified that I asked that it be deleted. How embarrassing, both my eco-footprint score and the fact I wanted to hide it.

Well, for shame!

I had to do something about it. First, I started tweaking my questionnaire answers to determine what had given me such a huge footprint. Alas, it turns out my problem is house size. Two people living in a house 2,500 square feet or larger drives up a score to over 30, no matter what. So even if I walk everywhere, eat only lettuce and *homegrown* lettuce at that, and throw away absolutely *nothing*, my eco-footprint remains stubbornly obscene.

The idea of taking in boarders occurred to me, but the strife this would cause to domestic tranquility could quite possibly drive our happy household into two separate domiciles, thus exacerbating our heavy footprint even further.

There is, however, another way. I could offset my global overindulgence by buying carbon offsets. As described in this month’s edition of *RealMoney* published by Co-op America, carbon offsets take an amount of carbon and other greenhouse gasses (GHG) out of the atmosphere equivalent to the level we are generating with our life style or some element of our life style.

The most straightforward example is offsetting the greenhouse gases one generates by flying on a vacation or business trip. The steps to this are simple. First, we calculate the amount of GHG emitted on the trip. (An online calculator is offered by *NativeEnergy* at www.nativeenergy.com/coop.) Once we have the number of tons of GHG generated by the trip, we can purchase offsets from a number of reputable offerings. Locally, Blue Ridge Electric offers the opportunity to purchase one KW of renewable energy for \$4 per month. How many KW will I need to bring my footprint to a less troubling level? That is my next step.

I have other alternatives as well. Other providers recommended in two independent studies that surveyed offset providers are The Climate Trust (www.carboncounter.org) and MyClimate (www.sustainabletravelinternational.org). Even more are listed in the March/April edition of *RealMoney* (found online at www.coopamerica.com). The article “Carbon Offsets Demystified” includes the same information I have shared here, plus more, while offering many different sources and approaches to carbon offsets.

So, what do I do about my large eco-footprint? How can I change my life and habits to become less an eco-hog? According to Co-op America, I need to reduce my energy use as much as possible and then buy carbon offsets for the rest. Now, where is my calculator?

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