

What really happens when you carbon offset your flight?¹

Greenhouse gas emissions are bad. These days, everybody except the President of the United States knows that. So when you book a flight, you can square the situation with your environmental karma by carbon offsetting. A few more dollars for a clean conscience? Done!

But what is carbon offsetting? Where does your money actually go? And should your conscience really be clean? Connor Cavanagh and Tor Benjaminsen investigated this issue, looking at the experience of Dutch NGO Face the Future (formerly the FACE Foundation), who teamed up with the Ugandan Wildlife Authority to establish a national park at Mount Elgon in eastern Uganda in the early 1990s and implement an integrated carbon offsetting and conservation project.

When you carbon offset your flight, maybe your money goes to an organisation like Face the Future. They use it to plant trees in developing countries, storing the carbon which you emitted with your flight. The planet is happy because global warming is reduced, local people are happy because they can get jobs in forestry management, and animals are happy because they have a bigger habitat. This triple-win narrative convinces you to check the box to carbon offset your flight – you're not just reducing global warming, you're funding development and conservation too! And this makes you happy! This warm, fuzzy glow is enhanced by glossy images showing areas such as Mount Elgon as pristine wildernesses. This TV-ad image, packaged for Western consumers on websites and social media, helps raise money and justifies the NGO's involvement in a landscape seemingly empty of human activity.

The happy ending and image of an Africa inhabited only by animals work well in stories like *The Lion King*. However, behind this rosy picture of benevolent Western NGOs saving the world lies a more complicated situation. This type of fiction which sells so well in the West masked a less-than-ethical reality, in which local communities and the environment were failed by Face the Future.

The Mount Elgon Forest Park was not empty in 1993 when it was designated a National Park. In fact, it was inhabited and used by many people but Face the Future still encouraged and helped finance the park's creation. After all, they needed complete control of the parkland to reforest it for their carbon offsetting scheme. What happened to the people who had previously depended on the area for a living? They were classified as encroachers and violently evicted by paramilitaries and soldiers, despite many having legitimate claims to the land. No official records were kept but one scholar estimates that 150,000 people lost their homes. The people removed from the park were also denied the rights guaranteed to them by the Ugandan Constitution for due warning and compensation. Continued paramilitary activities from 1993 prevented people returning or accessing the resources previously available to them. Not exactly what you imagine your carbon offsetting dollars will go towards!

While local residents lost out as a result of the evictions, Face the Future benefitted. The seized land could be used to plant forests and contribute to the NGO's carbon offsetting commitments. Other actors such as the ecotourism industry also profited from the locals' misfortune. A sort of reverse Robin Hood process took place, in which land and access to resources was removed from poor households and transferred to powerful state, NGO, and private actors.

You might expect that this willingness to carry out the project at any cost, no matter how brutal, would have at least translated into environmental success. However, it actually contributed to its

¹ Based on Connor Cavanagh and Tor A Benjaminsen, "Geoforum Virtual Nature, Violent Accumulation: The 'spectacular Failure' of Carbon Offsetting at a Ugandan National Park," *Geoforum* 56 (2014): 55–65.

downfall. Local resistance involving encroachment and lawsuits eventually halted reforestation in 2003. Even if this hadn't happened, the carbon offsetting scheme would have struggled with the issue of permanence - the risk of stored carbon being released by encroachment, forest fires etc. Face the Future had unwisely committed to preserving the security of its plantations for 99 years, an almost impossible promise to keep given the instability in the region. This means consumers' money would not have stored enough carbon to offset the environmental damage from their flights.

Unsurprisingly, there is now no mention of the Mount Elgon project on the Face the Future website. Knowledge of its failure would diminish their ability to continue selling the narrative of the universal benefits of carbon offsetting to the donating Western public. The lesson from this research for the average ethical consumer are clear: if you really want a clean conscience when you offset your flight, do a little investigation into the exact nature of the project first!