



**Left: Another plane comes in at Sydney Airport. Emissions growth concerns are casting a shadow over a growing airline industry.** Matthew Scherf

## Would you pay to offset your air travel emissions?

Australians can now offset the environmental impacts of their air travel – but how many will want to? **Gillian Kendall** asks the question of airline carbon levies.

With more affordable fares on offer because of competition, more Australians than ever are flying. But until recently, most may never have considered their travel impacts on the environment. Now, awareness and attitudes are changing.

As fares have dropped, more flights are being booked, and emissions and other

impacts from jet and airplane travel have increased exponentially.<sup>1</sup> Short-hop passenger flights contribute disproportionately. The Bureau of Transport and Regional Economics predicts that carbon-dioxide and other greenhouse gases from domestic aviation will reach nearly 110 000 gigagrams by 2020 – one of the fastest

growing contributors to transport-related emissions.

Overseas, programs to offset air travel emissions are already underway. They fall into two categories. One approach requires passengers to fund environmental initiatives, usually by paying levies on tickets or airport departure taxes. For example, since 1 February 2007, all passengers leaving from British airports have paid an additional emissions tax as part of the Air Passenger Duty – now £40 (about \$100 AUD) for economy class, long-haul flights.

The second approach to offsetting emissions is technological. Airlines are studying how jets can be more environmentally efficient through better engineering and less fuel – for instance by limiting the use of back-up engines, shortening taxi distances and reducing weight of aircraft. Air New Zealand, as an example, has reduced fuel burn in its long-haul fleet by changing procedures on the ground and by reducing the weight of its aircraft, measures that have included limiting the water and paper that have to be carried on board. Unlike some airlines, Air New Zealand is not imposing an emissions tax on fares.

Meanwhile, in Australia, the federal government is acting on environmental impacts by initially taking steps to offset emissions caused by government officials' travel. The Department of the Environment and Water Resources announced reductions in departmental travel, and are giving consideration to a carbon-offset program.

On 21 March, national carrier Virgin Blue Airways launched a carbon-offset program to allow both passengers and business operations to reduce their share of emissions. When buying fares, passengers can now choose to buy carbon offsets in accredited abatement projects.

The company itself has committed around \$2.5 million over the next five years to mitigating the emissions from staff travel.

According to Colin Lippiatt, Manager Public Affairs at Virgin Blue Airways, other steps to increase sustainability include using a new generation of fuel-efficient aircraft, more efficient flight routes and profiles, minimised waste and increased recycling, and a green procurement system.

<sup>1</sup> See *Ecoss* 123, 'Air transport impacts take off', pp15–17.

Although Qantas's Media Relations office refused to confirm or deny plans, other sources say the airline is considering implementing an optional fee for passengers wishing to offset emissions from their travel, as does Qantas partner, British Airways (BA).

BA now allows passengers to calculate the approximate carbon emissions cost of their travel through a ClimateCare calculator.<sup>2</sup> For instance, BA passengers travelling from Sydney to Heathrow may pay £28.83 (about \$71 AUD) to offset their 3.84 tonnes of emissions.

Similarly, Climatesure is a new travel insurance that includes a carbon offset in policies, but it is currently available only in the UK.

Even Lonely Planet and Rough Guides, companies that for decades touted the joys of cheap global roaming, are now supporting sustainable travel. Last year their respective founders Tony Wheeler and



Contrails from aircraft, while not emissions, also contribute to climate change by affecting atmospheric reflectance. Matt Kunz

Mark Ellingham made a call for travellers to fly less far, less frequently, and stay longer at destinations while using ground transport, after realising their advocacy for travel adventures may be indirectly contributing to climate impacts. They now encourage travellers to donate to carbon-offsetting schemes.

So, even if not forced to pay a government or airline fee, Australians might choose to look up their own carbon footprint and donate to offset it.

But with offset calculation being a new science, variations are inevitable. According to the calculator at UK site [www.climatecare.org/index.cfm](http://www.climatecare.org/index.cfm), a return flight from Sydney to Perth creates 0.72 tonnes of emissions, which can be offset for £5.32 (with direct exchange rates, about \$13.35). Another Australian calculator ([www.greenfleet.com.au](http://www.greenfleet.com.au)) calculates their impact at 1.04 tonnes – which can be offset by planting four trees for a tax-deductable quote of \$9.41.

<sup>2</sup> [www.climatecare.org/britishairways](http://www.climatecare.org/britishairways)

## Should we be paying an emissions tax on air travel?

*Ecós* wanted to find out what other Australian travellers think about offsetting air emissions, and how it should be paid for. Below are the results of our informal survey, taken at Melbourne Airport.

**Question 1: Recent increases in air travel have led to greater emissions of greenhouse gases. Knowing that, would you be willing to pay an optional fee to offset the carbon emissions of your own air travel?**

Out of 10 asked, Yes: 5; No: 3; Maybe: 2

'Yes, in much the same way as we do with our [green] electricity now.'

ZAIGA SVANOSIO, NEWLYN, VICTORIA.

'No, definitely not. I think the travelling public has been slugged enough with taxes. They pay departure taxes, fuel tax and God knows how many other taxes. Another environmental tax on top of all the others will achieve nothing really. It will just go into government coffers and disappear like everything else does.'

A PILOT (NO NAME GIVEN)

**Question 2: If paying such a fee were not optional, would you be happy to pay an offset equal to five per cent of the ticket price?**

Out of 10 asked, Yes: 8; No: 2

'I would not say "happy," but yes, if it was going to the right place, I would accept it. Five per cent is not a great amount provided it is getting channelled to the right areas.'

GARY SCHULZ, GOLD COAST, QUEENSLAND.



**Question 3: What if the offset were equal to 15 per cent of the ticket price?**

Out of 10 asked, Yes: 3; No: 5; Maybe: 2

'You would have to take 15 per cent into consideration. Keeping in mind that the airfares are variable anyway depending on the time of year that you travel, if you're adding a lot more onto the maximum fare, that would mean that you would have to pick another time to travel, or not go.'

JENNY ANDERSON, NEAR ECHUCA, VICTORIA.



'I would be more inclined toward 10 per cent. If it's a large international flight, 10 per cent would be better in my opinion.'

CHRISTIANA BAULCH, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

**Question 4: Britain has recently raised a mandatory Air Passenger Duty to £40 (about \$100 AUD). Would you be in favour of passengers in Australia paying a similar fee,**

**if you felt that the money would be used to offset carbon emissions?**

Out of 10 asked, Yes: 7; No: 3

'Obviously we are all aware that we have got to do something. Every day we hear something about global warming.'

JENNY ANDERSON, NEAR ECHUCA, VICTORIA.

'Certainly, if I thought that the whole amount would go [to emissions offset]. If it was clear-cut that it was going particularly for that, then I would, but if you were just paying a tax and didn't really know why, then I would not.'

CHRISTIANA BAULCH, MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

'No, I would object to it. There have got to be more tangible, realistic moves taken now and in the future to change our consumption and our production of these sorts of gases. Just imposing another fee or tax is not going to do it. A new tax will make people think initially, but a couple of years down the track, people ... [will] go back to doing whatever ... the commercial interests of the world effectively want us to do. We still have got to address the underlying consumption and population issues of the world. Unless we address those issues, we are just playing around the edges of the problem.'

GEOFF COLLS, HOBART, TASMANIA.

