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Episode #020

Carbon Offsetting

January 24, 2020



[00:00:05] Hello, hello, hello, and it's another day at the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge and welcome to the show.

[00:00:16] The subject of today's podcast is carbon offsetting.

[00:00:22] We'll explain what it is, how it works, why some people love it, praising it as an effective solution towards limiting climate change, while others think it is a load of rubbish, and just another example of us [kicking the can¹](#) further down the road.

[00:00:41] I'm quite excited about this one and it's something that's pretty close to my heart, although you'll have to wait until the end of the podcast to find out what I really think about it.

[00:00:53] Before we get right into it though, let me just take a minute to remind those of you without the key vocabulary and transcript in front of you that you can grab a copy of it and become a member of Leonardo English over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

¹ to avoid or delay dealing with a problem, e.g. *I don't think we should kick the can down the road and let our grandkids solve that problem*



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[00:01:10] Members get the transcripts and key vocabulary now also downloadable in shiny new PDF format for every podcast we've ever released, plus, of course, you'll get two new ones [zooming](#)² into your inbox every week.

[00:01:25] And in case you were not aware, the promotional early bird price of just nine euros per month is coming to an end at midnight on January the 31st, so if you want to lock in that super low promotional price, then make sure you head over and grab yourself a membership before midnight on the 31st.

[00:01:47] Head to [Leonardoenglish.com/subscribe](https://leonardoenglish.com/subscribe).

[00:01:52] Okay then carbon offsetting.

[00:01:55] You have probably heard of it, and you probably even have an idea about what it is.

[00:02:02] But in today's podcast we are going to [dig a little bit deeper](#)³, explain how it really works, talk through some of the pros and cons, and you can make your own mind up as to whether you think it's a good idea.

[00:02:18] I'm going to skip over the part where we all agree that global warming is a huge [existential](#)⁴ problem and we should do whatever we can to minimise our carbon footprint. I think that's almost a given.

² moving very quickly

³ go into more detail

⁴ relating to existence or being alive



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[00:02:33] So carbon offsetting is one way that has been proposed for mainly Western countries that are pumping carbon into the atmosphere to offset, to [counteract](#)⁵ their actions by paying for [initiatives](#)⁶ that reduce the amount of carbon in the atmosphere.

[00:02:55] Either [initiatives](#) that stop carbon going into the air in the first place or that remove, that take out, CO2 from the atmosphere.

[00:03:07] The idea is that you have a 'carbon damage' balance, so that's the amount of carbon that you're responsible for putting into the air, which can be from driving a car, taking planes, heating or cooling your home, eating meat, or doing anything else that is putting carbon into the air.

[00:03:30] And then you have a 'carbon repair' balance, which is the amount of carbon that you are responsible for taking out of the atmosphere, either through doing things that actually take CO2 out of the atmosphere, like planting trees, which [absorb](#)⁷ CO2 or through not putting it into the atmosphere in the first place, so for example, [financing](#)⁸ clean energy projects, so that the energy is generated without emitting carbon in the first place.

[00:04:03] To go what is called 'carbon neutral', your carbon damage minus your carbon repair needs to be below zero, think of it like a bank balance. This typically happens by people paying for carbon repair in the form of carbon offsets.

[00:04:25] So when you hear about rock stars, companies or even countries saying that they are carbon neutral, it doesn't mean that they are responsible for no emissions, but

⁵ to reduce or remove the effect of something unwanted by producing an opposite effect, e.g. *Drinking a lot of water counteracts the dehydrating effects of hot weather*

⁶ a new plan or process to achieve something or solve a problem

⁷ to take in a liquid, gas, or chemical

⁸ to provide the money needed for something to happen



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it means that their emissions or their carbon damage is offset by the carbon repair activities they are doing.

[00:04:49] The slightly strange thing about this is that it's perfectly possible to fly all the way around the world on a private jet and burn coal all day long, but if you pay enough to offset these activities, technically you are still carbon neutral.

[00:05:10] What's more the cost of these carbon repair, these carbon offsetting activities, on a personal level is actually probably quite a lot less than you might think.

[00:05:23] Offsetting a return flight from London to San Francisco, for example, would be about 20 pounds and offsetting a year's driving might be another 20 pounds, depending on the type of car that you drive of course.

[00:05:40] Add all of these up to calculate the cost on a personal level, and it might seem like quite a small price to pay for the prize of saving the planet.

[00:05:52] So it all sounds pretty good in theory, if we all just knew our carbon damage and made sure that it was offset by our carbon repair, is that just the solution to global warming?

[00:06:08] Well, no, it's not quite so simple.

[00:06:13] Despite its apparent simplicity, carbon offsetting has [its fair share⁹](#) of [critics¹⁰](#) and for some valid reasons.

[00:06:23] George Monbiot, a famous environmental journalist from the British newspaper The Guardian compared it to the ancient Catholic church's practice of selling indulgences, which is where you would be [absolved¹¹](#), you'd be forgiven for your

⁹ a reasonable amount

¹⁰ someone who says that they do not approve of someone or something

¹¹ (especially in religion or law) to free someone from guilt, blame, or responsibility for something



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sins, and you would have reduced time in [purgatory](#)¹², in return for financial donations, in return for money given to the church.

[00:06:53] He said that carbon offsets allow us to buy [complacency](#)¹³, political [apathy](#)¹⁴ and self-satisfaction.

[00:07:04] In plain English, it means that if there is an option for people to just pay the fine, to pay up, in exchange for their bad behaviour, they will just do it.

[00:07:17] It allows people to continue to engage in all of these activities that are very carbon-heavy, and are big contributors to global warming, but not feel guilty because they are now carbon neutral as they have paid to offset their carbon.

[00:07:36] You want to take a flight for a weekend away? Sure, you shouldn't feel bad about it because you can offset your carbon.

[00:07:44] The criticism is that it doesn't address the [root cause](#)¹⁵ of global warming and in order to have any chance of reducing the carbon in the atmosphere, people's behaviour needs to change.

[00:07:59] By promoting carbon offsets, the argument goes, there is no [incentive](#)¹⁶ for people's behaviour to change.

¹² the place to which Roman Catholics believe that the spirits of dead people go and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were alive, before they are able to go to heaven

¹³ a feeling of calm satisfaction with your own abilities or situation that prevents you from trying harder

¹⁴ behaviour that shows no interest or energy and shows that someone is unwilling to take action, especially over something important

¹⁵ the basic cause of something

¹⁶ something that encourages a person to do something



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[00:08:08] What's more, it's actually going the other way as society is saying that it's acceptable to just pay up and offset it.

[00:08:17] People often make the comparison between carbon offsetting and things like daycare centre late fees where in order to [deter](#)¹⁷, to [discourage](#)¹⁸, parents from being late, from picking up their children from daycare, from nursery, some daycare centres started to add fines, financial punishments, every time a parent was late.

[00:08:46] It was intended to be a [deterrent](#)¹⁹, to reduce the amount of times that parents were late to pick up their children, but actually had completely the opposite effect.

[00:08:58] The frequency of parents being late actually increased because they felt they could just pay the fine and get on with it.

[00:09:09] Critics of carbon offsetting also claimed that many projects will only have positive effects five, ten or twenty years [down the line](#)²⁰, in the future.

[00:09:20] This is especially the case for things like tree planting.

[00:09:25] Trees, obviously don't [grow overnight](#)²¹, so even if you pay for tree planting now, it won't have any effect on your carbon footprint for many years and a tonne of carbon taken out of the sky today is worth much more than one taken out of the sky in five, ten or twenty years' time.

¹⁷ to prevent someone from doing something or to make someone less enthusiastic about doing something by making it difficult for that person to do it or by threatening bad results if they do it

¹⁸ to make someone feel less confident, enthusiastic, and positive about something, or less willing to do something

¹⁹ see 'deter'

²⁰ in the future

²¹ happen in a short period of time



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[00:09:50] Now, in fact, the majority of carbon offsetting programmes have switched to more short-term wins, to quicker wins, from things like investing in clean energy to [distributing](#)²² more efficient cooking [stoves](#)²³.

[00:10:08] So they switched to things where there is an immediate impact, and in many cases it's also a little bit more measurable.

[00:10:17] But even with these, there's an additional problem, which is that it's often difficult to prove that the carbon offsetting schemes that have been put in place have actually had any positive impact or rather have had an impact that wouldn't have happened anyway.

[00:10:36] For example, if there is a scheme that encourages people in a certain area to [switch](#)²⁴ to an energy efficient light bulb, how can you really know whether people in that area wouldn't have switched anyway?

[00:10:53] Yes, it's a good thing that they are using energy efficient light bulbs, but if they'd have made that switch anyway, then there's no point in paying to offset it if the behaviour would have happened [in any case](#)²⁵.

[00:11:08] It also encourages the local government in the places where these offset [initiatives](#) are taking place not to engage in any of these kinds of activities if it knows that these activities will be done by others through carbon offsetting.

²² to give something out to several people, or to spread or supply something

²³ a piece of equipment that burns fuel or uses electricity in order to heat a place

²⁴ change

²⁵ also



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[00:11:26] There's also the other criticism, similar to the criticism that is [leveled](#)²⁶ at lots of charitable giving, which is you never know quite how efficient it is.

[00:11:39] If you are giving \$20 to offset something through a clean cooking project in Botswana, you have no idea how efficient your carbon offsetting is.

[00:11:51] You'll never go there to check and there have been some bad [operators](#)²⁷ in the carbon offsetting market that have [sullied](#)²⁸, that have damaged the reputation of the industry.

[00:12:07] These are, of course, all valid concerns and the carbon offsetting industry has [stepped up to the mark](#)²⁹ and implemented some [rigorous](#)³⁰ standards and [accreditations](#)³¹ for carbon offsetting programmes.

[00:12:21] A bit like fair trade or organic food.

[00:12:25] This has done a lot to [clamp down](#)³² on bad actors and has meant that, in theory at least, carbon offsetting should be more efficient, more transparent, and that more of the money goes towards projects that actually have a positive effect instead of either just going into someone's pocket or being wasted [altogether](#)³³.

²⁶ aimed or directed something at someone or something

²⁷ a company that does a particular type of business

²⁸ to spoil something that is pure or someone's perfect reputation

²⁹ become ready to take responsibility

³⁰ careful to look at or consider every part of something to make certain it is correct or safe

³¹ official approval, esp. in order to maintain satisfactory standards

³² to take strong action to stop or limit a harmful or unwanted activity

³³ in total



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[00:12:48] So what is the answer?

[00:12:52] Is carbon offsetting a good thing or is it just another way for people to pay to not think about their polluting activities and to not change their behaviour [in the slightest](#)³⁴?

[00:13:06] Well, it's of course not black and white and there isn't a [one size fits all](#)³⁵ answer.

[00:13:13] If you are someone that is just paying to offset their carbon and not changing your behaviour in any way, or worse, if you think that carbon offsetting allows you to behave in a more polluting way because you can just pay to offset it, then that's obviously not really a good thing at all.

[00:13:34] You can make the argument that it's slightly better than not offsetting anything, but it doesn't address the root cause, which is the need for behaviour change.

[00:13:44] But if you carbon offset as a part of a strategy to reduce your overall emissions and do that as well as changing some of your behaviour, then that [inevitably](#)³⁶ has to be a good thing.

[00:14:00] On a personal level, I started offsetting my carbon emissions about a year ago.

[00:14:06] Money just comes out of my account every month. And yes, it does make me feel a little bit less bad about my own environmental impact, but it's also part of a wider effort that I am making to reduce my footprint.

³⁴ at all

³⁵ (intended to be) suitable for everyone or every purpose

³⁶ certain to happen and unable to be avoided or prevented



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[00:14:20] And if you are interested in this, there are loads of different services you can check out that will help you calculate your own carbon footprint and offset it if you choose.

[00:14:32] The one I use, which I definitely recommend is called project Wren. W. R. E. N.

[00:14:38] It's a site that allows you to give a bit of information about your lifestyle, then it will help you select projects that will help you offset your carbon footprint.

[00:14:49] It's a pretty cool one, and I'll leave a link in the show notes if you're interested.

[00:14:53] One final benefit that a lot of new carbon offsetting programmes have is what is called co-benefits meaning that carbon offsetting has an additional benefit [over and above](#)³⁷ the carbon benefit.

[00:15:10] For example, providing employment in an area or providing an [enlarged](#)³⁸ habitat for wildlife. So they are double wins, I guess, and with this, I think it's quite hard to argue.

[00:15:25] Okay then I hope that this has been an interesting dive into the world of carbon offsetting.

[00:15:32] As you now know, it's not that simple.

[00:15:36] We've also only just touched the surface of carbon offsetting, and I hope you will excuse me for [skimming over](#)³⁹ some other pretty important parts.

³⁷ above or higher than something else, sometimes so that one thing covers the other

³⁸ made larger

³⁹ to read or consider something quickly in order to understand the main points, without studying it in detail



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[00:15:47] As I said at the start of the podcast, if you are interested in becoming a member of Leonardo English and getting the transcripts and key vocabulary for this podcast and for every podcast with ever done and two new podcasts a week, then our promotional price of just nine euros per month is coming to an end at midnight on January the 31st so that's exactly a week from the day that this podcast is coming out.

[00:16:15] They can be the most amazing resource in terms of understanding every word in the podcast, and if you are using this as a real learning resource that it's definitely worth checking out.

[00:16:28] You can find out more at leonardoenglish.com/subscribe.

[00:16:33] And finally on the subject of carbon offsetting, if you were thinking about jumping on a plane to an English speaking country and taking a course and considering that against a membership of Leonardo English and learning through podcasts, handy transcripts and learning resources, then of course, becoming a member of Leonardo English and not taking the flight will not only save you a load of money, but be better for your carbon footprint.

[00:17:01] Okay. I know that one might be a little bit [tenuous⁴⁰](#), but you [get my drift⁴¹](#).

[00:17:06] I think we'll just end it there.

[00:17:08] You've been listening to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English.

[00:17:14] I'm Alastair Budge and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁴⁰ weak and possibly does not exist

⁴¹ understand the meaning



Key vocabulary

Word

Definition

Kicking the can

to avoid or delay dealing with a problem, e.g. I don't think we should kick the can down the road and let our grandkids solve that problem

Zooming

moving very quickly

Dig a little bit deeper

go into more detail

Existential

relating to existence or being alive

Counteract

to reduce or remove the effect of something unwanted by producing an opposite effect, e.g. Drinking a lot of water counteracts the dehydrating effects of hot weather

Initiatives

a new plan or process to achieve something or solve a problem

Absorb

to take in a liquid, gas, or chemical

Financing

to provide the money needed for something to happen

Its fair share

a reasonable amount

Critics

someone who says that they do not approve of someone or something

Absolved

(especially in religion or law) to free someone from guilt, blame, or responsibility for something

Purgatory

the place to which Roman Catholics believe that the spirits of dead people go and suffer for the evil acts that they did while they were alive, before they are able to go to heaven



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Complacency	a feeling of calm satisfaction with your own abilities or situation that prevents you from trying harder
Apathy	behaviour that shows no interest or energy and shows that someone is unwilling to take action, especially over something important
Root cause	the basic cause of something
Incentive	something that encourages a person to do something
Deter	to prevent someone from doing something or to make someone less enthusiastic about doing something by making it difficult for that person to do it or by threatening bad results if they do it
Discourage	to make someone feel less confident, enthusiastic, and positive about something, or less willing to do something
Deterrent	see 'deter'
Down the line	in the future
Grow overnight	happen in a short period of time
Distributing	to give something out to several people, or to spread or supply something
Stoves	a piece of equipment that burns fuel or uses electricity in order to heat a place
Switch	change
In any case	also
Leveled	aimed or directed something at someone or something
Operators	a company that does a particular type of business



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Sullied	to spoil something that is pure or someone's perfect reputation
Stepped up to the mark	become ready to take responsibility
Rigorous	careful to look at or consider every part of something to make certain it is correct or safe
Accreditations	official approval, esp. in order to maintain satisfactory standards
Clamp down	to take strong action to stop or limit a harmful or unwanted activity
Altogether	in total
In the slightest	at all
One size fits all	(intended to be) suitable for everyone or every purpose
Inevitably	certain to happen and unable to be avoided or prevented
Over and above	above or higher than something else, sometimes so that one thing covers the other
Enlarged	made larger
Skimming over	to read or consider something quickly in order to understand the main points, without studying it in detail
Tenuous	weak and possibly does not exist
Get my drift	understand the meaning

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What did you like? What could we do better?



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What did you struggle to understand?

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