

Offsetting under pressure

Marc Hudson interviews Kevin Anderson for Nature Climate Change

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Kevin Anderson* explains why he refused to attend the Planet Under Pressure conference on the grounds that the organisers demanded a compulsory 'offset' fee.

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The interview builds on an offsetting article written by Anderson and published in Nature

<http://www.nature.com/news/the-inconvenient-truth-of-carbon-offsets-1.10373>

An open access [pre-edited version](#) is available.

What did you plan to present at the Planet Under Pressure conference?

I was going to present a paper that argued orthodox analyses of climate change mitigation drastically underplay the level of transformation necessary in our economy to meet a 2°C target. Research that concludes that effective mitigation is compatible with continued economic growth within industrialised (Annex 1) nations does not recognise the constraint presented by emissions already released and those we are locked into in the short term. Moreover, there is a lot of smoke and mirrors around the probabilities of meeting our 2°C target. The Government's commitment under the Copenhagen Accord relates, at most, to a 10% chance of exceeding 2°C, yet it has chosen to adopt a 63% chance in setting the UK's carbon budgets. This inconsistency is rife within UK and international targets around climate change and has permitted us to claim some action when really we're doing nothing to combat emissions. In 2012 with a legacy of inaction and rapidly rising emissions it is now difficult, if not impossible, to envisage anything other than a planned economic recession within the industrialised (Annex 1) countries being compatible with 2°C, 3°C and increasingly 4°C futures, particularly if some emissions space is to be available for non-Annex 1 nations to develop.

Can you talk us through the reasons why you did not attend

The conference organisers have decided to make a contribution to an offsetting

fund compulsory for delegates. They will use this money to purchase "emissions reduction credits" from a carbon trader and have dedicated a number of pages on the event website to promote this endeavour. There are good reasons to conclude that offsetting is worse than doing nothing and I have repeatedly gone on the record at events and in the media to make this case. I reluctantly decided not to attend as it would be hypocritical of me to purchase offset credits, when, in my judgment, offsetting exacerbates rather than mitigates carbon emissions

Did you communicate your concerns to the organisers of the conference?

At the time of registration (Nov 2011) I made my position known to the organisers and there were a series of email exchanges including from Tyndall Centre and wider colleagues. However, the organisers were adamant that the purchase of offset credits would remain mandatory; purchasing offsets was something that I could not justify either personally or in terms of professional credibility and consequently I did not register for the event.

Why do you object to offsetting?

Briefly, the science underpinning climate change makes clear that the temperature rise by around the end of this century (compared with pre-industrial levels) correlates well with the total quantity of emissions put into the atmosphere over the century (the carbon budget). Consequently, when assessing the impact of our activities we

have to consider the total sum of our emissions released between 2000 and 2100 and the *impact of offset projects must be measured over this period*. There is no point in reducing emissions in the short-run by 1 tonne if the knock-on impact is 2 tonnes emitted in 2020 or even 1.5 tonnes in say 2050. The implications of this for the concept of offsetting and CDM are profound. Over a century timescale there are substantial opportunities for offsetting to trigger emissions to increase within both those nations buying the offsets (e.g. the UK) and those receiving the offset funds. This century scale accounting framework for assessing the meaningfulness of offsets is pivotal to understanding their net climate impact. Implicit in the offsetters' claim to account for carbon leakage over the relevant timeframe are powers of prediction that could have foreseen the internet and low-cost airlines following from Marconi's 1901 telegraph and the Wright brothers' 1903 maiden flight. Difficult though it is for contemporary society to accept, ascribing any meaningful levels of certainty to such long-term multiplier effects is not possible and consequently offsetting is ill-fated from the start.

What do you consider to be the alternatives to offsetting?

First of all, the main reason for offsetting in the case of this conference is air travel to the event. I take the straightforward view that we need to identify and considerably reduce such high-emission activities and my concern

is that offsetting simply enables scientists (and policy leaders) to continue to consider high-carbon behaviours appropriate. Indeed, a number of colleagues have made this case to me, confident that their emissions were being “neutralised”. The knock on effect is that we reinforce these behaviours as socially acceptable and lend legitimacy to the “pollute and offset” paradigm. Instead, we need to work hard at making virtual engagement and lower-carbon travel options available and also we need to be much more discerning and selective in what we do attend, however challenging this may be. Planet Under Pressure could have included low-carbon travel advice and developed innovative registration tariffs rewarding lower-carbon involvement. Moreover it could have considered establishing high quality virtual links to overseas hubs reducing the need for some of those delegates to attend the UK physically but still providing a hub of activity in their home nation. None of this is easy – but then neither will be dealing with the impacts of severe climate change. Unfortunately, in my view, the organisers chose to take the easy way out – and the climate will suffer as a consequence.

How do you engage internationally and still keep emissions low?

Whilst accepting I have a long way to go in bringing my emissions down to an appropriate level, I nevertheless have made a conscious effort to avoid certain high-emission activities. With regards to flying I have not flown for well over seven years and yet have still managed to contribute to international discussions around climate change through papers, articles and occasional virtual engagement – but also including a lecture tour in China earlier this – the train journey was probably the most productive period of my academic

career and I estimate an order of magnitude reduction in emissions compared with flying (see http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/onlinetools/personalt_blog/kevint_anderson_t_2 for the reasoning behind this conclusion)

You say developed nations must reduce emissions radically & urgently. What about the developing world?

I am strongly of the opinion that a rise in emissions from the industrialising (non Annex 1) nations is, in the short term, a good indicator of rising prosperity and consequently should be welcomed. Our last Royal Society paper suggested a hugely demanding pathway from non Annex 1 nations in which their existing rate of emission growth is almost halved, they peak emissions by 2025 and then reduce at twice the rate Stern and others say is possible with economic growth (I think they are wrong on this though). Such a pathway is just about viable and could, if allied with radical and immediate reductions from those of us in the Annex 1 nations, give an outside chance of not exceeding 2C. No doubt many reading this will say that such reductions are impossible, but is living with a 4C or 5C future any less impossible? There is no part in this future for offsetting. We need to be doing everything we can now – not passing the buck on to someone else.

What do you hope to achieve by publicly declining to attend?

Given my view on offsetting, the most important thing is not to purposefully increase emissions to no end. But in addition to this, personal consistency is important – climate change is full of slippery slopes; offsetting and claims that our work is too important for us to curtail our travel to conferences are two such examples. The view that those working on climate change are somehow legitimate exceptions from

stringent mitigation and as such should be given an additional emissions allowance is endemic amongst our climate change community. I think it is time we demonstrated a little more humility. If my declining to attend can help trigger such debates then that, in itself, is a valuable outcome. Ultimately, if those of us well informed on climate change are not prepared to act in accordance with what we may be requesting of others, I see little chance of any meaningful change more widely.

Is this the first time you have declined to attend a conference?

Yes on the basis of offsetting. However, I seldom attend major international events for a variety of reasons – important amongst these is that they typically involve, in my view, unjustifiably large CO2 emissions. However, I also find they seldom offer significant new information that I couldn't easily get elsewhere and for a much lower carbon spend; they have a very large opportunity cost and are often intellectually less rewarding than 'local' discussions with researchers around the UK; they add emails and new contacts to an already unmanageable email backlog; and, in the end, whilst we've been busily engaging in evermore international climate jamborees emissions have been rising out of control – so they certainly haven't engendered wider mitigation. Attending international conferences, workshops and meetings is supposed to be good for an academics status – and as such stimulates a self-perpetuating cycle of travel, as early career researchers feel compelled and are encouraged to attend such events. Personally, I am unconvinced by this argument, and take the view that status should be premised on the robustness and integrity of our research rather than the number of air miles we clock up.