

20 ANSWERS: RECONCILING AIR TRAVEL AND CLIMATE CHANGE

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Climate change has become a very significant issue for the global tourism industry, as reviewed recently by Buckley (2010), and Weaver (2011, in press). It may affect the perceived attractiveness of different tourism destinations relative to each other and to countries of origin (Buckley, 2008; Eugenio-Martin & Campos-Soria, 2010; Hares, Dickinson, & Wilkes, 2010). It may affect air travel through mitigation and offset measures (Buckley, 2010; Mair 2011; Scott, Peeters, & Gössling, 2010). It may affect travel patterns through increased financial and social costs (Hares et al., 2010).

Most people in developed nations are aware of attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, including those from air travel, by mechanisms including emission taxes and offset programs (Bristow, Wardman, Zanni, & Chintakayala, 2010; Miller, Rathouse, Scarles, Holmes, & Tribe, 2010). Even so, they continue to travel on vacation to distant destinations, even those at particular risk from climate change (Dawson, Stewart, Lemelin, & Scott, 2010; Eijgelaar, Thaper, & Peeters, 2010); and tourism industry associations and destination marketing organisations lobby them to do so.

Individual travellers thus receive conflicting external signals. This contribution examines how they rationalise their decisions. It focuses on longhaul air travel from developed to developing nations, the largest tourism contributor to climate change. It also focuses on two groups with highest knowledge and awareness of tourism's climate impacts: clients of commercial ecolodges, and university students taking international ecotourism field courses. The groups overlapped in age, wealth, and education. Gender balance was even in both groups. The members of both groups originated in developed nations around the world.

Their views were elicited through individual semi-structured interviews, conducted after several days of general conversation to establish rapport. Discussions were recorded as notes and quotes shortly after each interview. Some were continued via email and Facebook®. All interviews took place in public areas and informal settings. No incentives or inducements were offered. Arguments both for and against longhaul travel to developing countries were canvassed, so that participants had unpressured opportunities to express any relevant viewpoint. Fifty interviews were held. No new responses were received after the first 30.

The data generated represent over 100 hours of individual interview content. This compares, for example, to 8 groups of about 8 people each in joint focus-group discussions for Miller et al. (2010). Responses were dissected into small-scale conceptual components which were classified and re-assembled iteratively, following standard procedure for qualitative analysis of interview materials (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). A total of 87 items were extracted, falling into 28 categories with 1–6 respondents mentioning each, though in different words. The breadth of responses is notable: 7 categories were mentioned by 5–6 respondents, 9 by 3–4 and 12 by 1–2.

Results are summarised in Table 1. Fewer than one third of respondents expected to change their travel patterns so as to reduce climate change impacts. Over two thirds planned to continue travelling as currently. Those who plan to travel less or save money focus on mechanisms, rationales and constraints. Those who plan to keep travelling provide a wide range of justifications. Similar though less varied results were reported by Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan, and Jaeger (2001) for climate change mitigation measures more broadly.

Most of these justifications would be considered socially and morally acceptable by peers of those travelling. Visiting relatives or spending holidays with partner or children are considered as social obligations; and the wealthy accept each others’ fortunes. Only the arguments of childlessness, planetary doom and retrospective intergenerational equity are potentially contentious.

These results suggest that even environmentally knowledgeable people will reallocate funds and rationalise continued holiday travel, even under greatly increased airfares. This matches the results of econometric approaches (Tol, 2007) for carbon taxes up to >50-those proposed and >100-current offset costs. Carbon taxes would thus raise revenue but would not reduce air travel or emissions. This applies for many environmental taxes (Buckley, 1991).

If air travel costs and social contexts change gradually, then quantitative survey techniques and econometric models can provide more precise estimates of how people are likely to change their behaviours, lifestyles, mobilities and expenditures. For such approaches to be reliable, however, they must include all likely categories of change. This contribution shows that there are many more categories than considered previously. Rationalisations relying on social obligations, in particular, merit further research attention.

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Table 1. Reconciling Air Travel and Climate Change Impacts at Individual Scale

Categories	Typical phrase
REDUCE IMPACTS (30%)	
Travel less in total	
1. travel less frequently(10%)	fewer trips
2. travel less far(10%)	close to home
consistency between home and holiday lifestyles(6%)	energy saving
doubt reliability of airline carbon offset programs(4%)	if they work
3. substitute other types of expenditure for holiday travel(4%)	shopping instead
Travel to fewer destinations	
4. learn more about destinations visited(4%)	appreciate things
5. travel overland from single gateway airport(2%)	overland journey
6. stay longer at individual destinations(6%)	spend more time
constraints on longer stays	
time away from other commitments(6%)	finding time
desire to travel with friends(6%)	travel together
SAME IMPACTS (70%)	
Save money and keep travelling	
7. put more effort into planning holiday travel(6%)	plan carefully
8. search for discounted fares(2%)	specials, standbys
9. select destinations which are cheaper to get to(8%)	cheaper places
10. cheaper accommodation and activities at destinations(4%)	keep it cheap
11. change home lifestyle so as to afford travel(10%)	save harder
Pay more and keep travelling	
12. buy carbon offsets(2%)	buy offsets
13. having no children offsets individual impacts(2%)	less impact
14. obligations to visit relatives(14%)	family thing
especially if old or unwell	can't say no
15. worthy gift to children(12%)	give to my kids
16. special occasions with partner(12%)	our big chance
17. earned the right through hard work(4%)	worked so hard
18. others have travelled, equitable to do so too(4%)	baby boomers
19. inherited wealth, accept good luck(8%)	silver spoon
20. thinks planet is doomed, intends to enjoy life meanwhile(2%)	while I can

N=50; multiple responses, percentages sum to >100%.