

## How to live carbon neutral

Guilty about your lifestyle? Buy some offsets

**Sherry Noik-Bent, National Post**

Published: Saturday, October 21, 2006

Toronto businessman Leonard Allen drives a Prius and lives in a solar-powered home. With every flick of the light switch, he's setting an example for his five-year-old son and five-month-old daughter. But he wants to do more.

"I'm looking for ways to give back to the environment and offset the ill effects of electrical generation in the province," he says.

Mr. Allen is one of a growing number of people who, in the absence of any federal action to combat climate change, are taking their own steps to reduce their footprint on the planet. He is going "carbon neutral."

Every time you brew your morning coffee, drive the kids to school, surf the Internet, turn up the thermostat, zap a Hot Pocket in the microwave, charge an iPod or cellphone, throw a party or board an airplane, you are directly responsible for burning fossil fuels that emit greenhouse gases (GHG), an average of five to six tonnes worth for each and every Canadian.

Instead of giving up the conveniences of contemporary life, you can counter your emissions by purchasing "carbon offsets" in an amount equal to the GHG you generate. That money is then invested in climate-friendly activities of three types: renewable energy projects, energy-efficient retrofits and reforestation.

"People are doing things they're not really aware of, despite their best intentions," says Deborah Kaplan, executive director of Toronto-based Zerofootprint. "Offsetting is a voluntary means for people to deal with their environmental impact in a way that's measurable and quantifiable."

The not-for-profit Zerofootprint (zerofootprint.net) has to date worked mostly with companies and events, offsetting the new Roots Rosedale store and the International Festival of Authors. But for Mr. Allen and other individual customers, it will assess personal carbon emissions and levy an annual per-tonne charge. (A redesigned Web site is expected to be up and running mid-November.)

Critics say that buying offsets is simply paying penance for pollution, a poor substitute for behavioural change or direct action by citizens, companies and governments.

But, counters Howie Chong of Toronto's Carbon-Zero ([carbonzero.ca](http://carbonzero.ca)), nobody living in the modern era can eliminate their personal emissions entirely. "The whole purpose of [the offsets] is to put money and resources into the technology that actually helps us get out of the mess we're in right now."

And even if we all install solar panels, drive hybrid vehicles and load up on compact fluorescent bulbs, there's still the matter of all the things we buy that are produced and transported using fossil fuels (including, most likely, the panels, the car and the bulbs).

But it's getting easier to live a carb-conscious lifestyle as an increasing array of industries goes carbon neutral. Today, you can plan a carbon-neutral wedding, book a carbon-neutral flight (Uniglobe, WestJet) or buy carbon-neutral carpeting (InterfaceFLOR).

The emissions have already been neutralized for Al Gore's book *An Inconvenient Truth* and for all the books from B.C.'s New Society Publishers. *Syriana* was the first film from a major production company to be certified carbon neutral. Warner Bros. calculated about 2,000 tonnes from filming, flights, rental vehicles, hotel energy, diesel generators, office and warehouse energy, shipping emissions and the like; offsets were purchased through U.S.-based NativeEnergy.

The latest CD by David Gilmour (Pink Floyd) and the most recent tours of the Rolling Stones and Pearl Jam have all been offset.

The Stones' offsets -- they had one tree planted per every 60 fans in attendance at nine U.K. dates -- are being paid by tour sponsor T-Mobile, at a cost of (ps)24,000 (\$51,000). Pearl Jam will give US\$100,000 to offset tour vehicles, venue energy and hotel stays to nine organizations that focus on climate change, renewable energy and other environmental causes. The Dave Matthews Band is paying to offset its touring for the past 15 years.

The Olympics, the Super Bowl and the World Cup are going carbon neutral.

So, sure, you could sit on the couch eating pork rinds and watching sports and call yourself an environmentalist. If you want to be a little more active, there are emissions calculators on the Internet for car travel ([cleanairpass.com](http://cleanairpass.com)), for air travel ([offsetters.ca](http://offsetters.ca)), or for both transportation and home ([safeclimate.net](http://safeclimate.net)). Condo dwellers can get an estimate by getting the building's total consumption for bulk-metered services and dividing it by the number of suites.

Most vendors specify a rate per tonne or offer preset "packages" for individuals, families or people who don't have the data available to calculate their emissions. CarbonZero's rate varies according to the project, somewhere between \$20 and \$40 per tonne.

And you can take it even further. Besides GHG emissions, Zerofootprint can also measure resource use -- the fuel, water, wood and so on used in manufacturing -- so it can come up with an offset for your entire home library and, soon, for your CD collection.

So far, Mr. Allen has signed on to offset the one tonne of emissions and 186,000 litres of water used in electrical generation for his home, at a cost of \$73 a year. He will pay a further \$65 a year to offset the 26,000 kilometres he drives and the 14,000 km he travels by air. This is just the kind of remedy he was looking for.

"It's the only tool that engages the homeowner directly in being able to become part of the solution," he says. "We are actively contributing to environmental gain."

© National Post 2006