

TROPICAL BIRDING

Worldwide Birding & Photography Tours

Tropical Birding will be 3x Carbon Negative by 2021

By 2021 Tropical Birding will NOT be Carbon Neutral. That simply wouldn't be good enough. We will be three times better than that. For every ton of carbon that our operations add to the planet, we will be funding projects that act as a carbon sink, to the tune of three times our own emissions. We can no longer sit by and watch our planet take the hit without doing what we can, and being the leaders that our industry needs. We will take this bold stand now and set an ethical and moral example that I am sure many of our competitors will follow.

Many of us who travel to see the planet's wildlife are told that if we really cared, we would simply stay

at home. In Dutch it's *vliegschaamte* and the Germans say *flugscham*. And in English "flight shame" is the guilt that you feel when you realize your trip to Miami or Lisbon might be forcing a polar bear out of its home. So, let's quickly consider the negative and positive impacts that flying has on biodiversity - yes, its positive impacts!

Do you believe in shame?

All flying contributes approximately 2.5% of CO₂ emissions worldwide. It's hard to find numbers that tell us precisely how much of that is tourism vs business vs other travel, and even trickier to uncover how much of that tourism can be considered nature tourism. While it is highly unlikely that the total amount of nature-based travel would account for more than 5% of all flying (surely, it's much less, but let's accept the maximum possible blame). So, if all nature-based travel was entirely eliminated, and our "flight shame" conscience was as clean as a whistle, the maximum amount of global CO₂ emissions saved would be 0.125% of the glob-



al annual total. Is that enough to reverse climate change? Is it enough to make you feel better? Talk about throwing the baby out with bathwater! Let's consider what other impacts this would likely have.

What impact would eliminating nature-based travel have on biodiversity?

There is an echo chamber within the climate crisis. There is no doubt that it is the most important issue of our time, but we have to think about the impacts that some of these lifestyle choices promoted by the climate-change lobby have outside of that echo chamber. I'd like to address these impacts using three different examples: at a species-level, Mountain Gorillas in East Africa; at an ecosystem level, the forests of Madagascar; and at a national and government levels, Costa Rica.

In 1978, Mountain Gorillas in Uganda, Rwanda and DRC numbered only 240 mature individuals, and they were slipping steadily towards extinction. Dianne Fossey feared they would all be gone by the year 2000. But in 2018, they numbered around 1000 individuals and the population numbers are increasing. This conservation success is the result of a habituation and tourism program that is profitable, effective and well organized. It relies on people who can afford the US \$ 750-1500 permits, and these tend to be international visitors who have flown to the country. For Rwanda alone, this single species contributes more than US \$200 million/year to the national economy, and 10% of this was returned to local communities for education, electrification and assisting local entrepreneurs to start businesses, making the Mountain Gorillas an asset that is protected and cherished by all Rwandans. If the tourists that generate this revenue were to disappear, so would ultimately every single Mountain Gorilla. Along with them, would go the last vestiges of the endemic-rich eastern Albertine Rift forests.

Madagascar is the sixth poorest nation on Earth, with 75% of the population surviving on less than US \$1.90/day. At the same time, it has been designated by Conservation International and the United Nations as one of the planet's 12 megadiverse counties, with a long history of biological isola-

Thanks to wise "greening" initiatives in Ecuador, deforested landscapes have rapidly recovered. In this recent photo, a new forest has quickly replaced a former cattle pasture.



tion and some of the highest rates of endemism on the planet. The biological riches restricted to the island are staggering: over 200 endemic mammals, 30% of which are Critically Endangered or Endangered; over 100 endemic bird species, including four endemic families; over 360 reptiles; and somewhere between 300-500 species of frogs (much of the taxonomy remains unresolved). It's a treasure trove. The vast majority of Madagascar is deforested, and only small patches of crucial habitat remain within a matrix of human-altered landscapes. Most of the forest that remains, and which is well protected, is essentially managed by local communities that make their living through tourist dollars. Without this income, it would not be long before these last forests were converted into grasslands and rice paddies. The money spent by tourists that fly to Madagascar on airplanes is the thin line of defense that protects these carbon sink forests and the unique biodiversity that they contain.

Back in 1945, Costa Rica began establishing the protected areas that now cover some 25% of the country. Both the government and the private sector decided to use ecotourism to make their protected areas economically viable. It worked. Over 50% of tourists to Costa Rica come to see its wildlife, and tourism generated a whopping US \$ 2.4 billion in 2012. Even more impressively, Costa Rica doubled its forest cover from 26% to 52% between 1984 and 2017. Costa Rica aims to be Earth's first plastic and carbon neutral nation on Earth by 2021. It is international tourism combined with a sense of global responsibility that has compelled Costa Rica to do this.

So, what would be the appropriate response? Not to visit any of these places in order to contribute to the saving of 0.125% of global emissions? Watch Costa Rica's entire green economy collapse because it would be better than "flight shame"? Don't do that. Forgoing your travel to biodiversity hotspots is not the way forward. If nature tourists that value biodiversity suddenly stopped flying to Uganda, Madagascar or Costa Rica for their holidays, they would quickly condemn these thriving and diverse environments to barren monoculture. And these are just three simple examples. It would be a global phenomenon. With all that said, it is not a simple case of having to make an agonizing choice between saving biodiversity or reducing carbon emissions. You can do both, and we'll show you how.

Taking responsibility

Some corporations continue to bury their heads in the sand, while others are willing to acknowledge that their operations impact the planet and are willing to have an honest and open discussion about it. For example, the Dutch airline, KLM, re-



cently launched a 'fly responsibly' campaign that has three pillars: (1) drive, take a train or use public transport rather than fly on a short-haul flights (less than 300 miles) - it's often faster; (2) pack light, as excess luggage uses more aviation fuel; and, (3) for long-haul flights, voluntarily purchase carbon offsets over and above your carbon emissions.

The purchase of carbon offsets is particularly interesting. People think that it is expensive, but it is not. A return economy ticket from Seattle to Amsterdam costs US \$1600-\$2500, depending on when you fly. The cost of a carbon offset is US \$14.62 - less than 1%! So even if you wanted to offset your carbon impact by 3x the amount of your emissions, it would still only cost US \$43.86. Anyone who can travel to an international destination can afford this. In a recent survey, 87% of all travelers said they wanted to travel sustainably. So surely that number is even higher among nature-based travelers. Come on people, we can

do this! We simply cannot wait for our procrastinating governments. Companies like Tropical Birding, and individual citizens like those who travel with us, need to take the lead.

Responsible Nature Travel: How is Tropical Birding going to do it?

Our intention is not to be carbon neutral. Instead we want our customers to feel that one of the byproducts of any trip with us is that by the time your vacation is over, there will be less carbon and more forest on the planet. Your holiday will be something to be proud of, not ashamed of.

How will we achieve this? First off, we will have to be completely transparent about how we calculate our own carbon footprint. We want all of our office, marketing, tour, and incidental costs included, and we will make these available for public scrutiny. In addition, we plan on appointing an advisory board of independent, carbon offset experts to audit and assist with our calculations. We will also tell you where every penny of the carbon offset / biodiversity enhancement cash is going, and will invite argument and discussion. We'd like our customer base to regulate us, and will not hide anything. We will not present bogus claims about the wonders that we are doing, and then not back it up with verifiable data. We will be in full-blown WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) mode!

Secondly, we do not want our carbon offsets to go into the wrong kind of greening, nor to support faux-NGOs that spend more money on administration and marketing than on supporting the programs they pawn. And there is plenty of that! In Ireland, which was almost completely deforested by 1900, reforestation now covers 11%, with a total goal of 18% by 2046. Great news, right? Wrong! They are planting fast-growing Sitka Spruce trees from northwestern North America. This is not just short sighted; it's an environmental disaster all of its own. These plantations are ecological dead zones, and when these trees' needles decompose on the ground, they alter the soil ecology. It's a mess. So to ensure that the offsets are going to the right kinds of projects we will have a separate advisory board with expertise in this area.

The projects that we will support will be ones we understand, in countries where we have a presence, so that we can monitor them. They will have both carbon offset goals and be important biodiversity hotspots, or areas critical for ecosystem functioning. This will be land that we can make our clients feel proud to be a part of saving. We have a history of supporting smaller organizations like the Mindo Cloudforest Foundation in Ecuador, and we helped with the reforestation of both

Milpe and Rio Silanche reserves in the early 2000s. So we were doing this long before it became trendy. We are still working towards selecting the projects that we will support. And our ultimate direction will be driven by our panel of carbon offset experts. But stay tuned. These are not hollow words.

Will this move make us less profitable? Sure. Will it make the trips a little more expensive? Yes, but not by as much as most people think. Our carbon negative contribution will be generated 50% from shareholder profits and 50% from raising prices. We think that our clients will consider a median price increase of around US \$ 50/tour to be fair and the right thing to do.

What else you can do?

Although Tropical Birding will cover the offset for the duration of your tour, we have not included your journey to the starting point of the tour. We have done this for the following reasons: (1) some guests travel from near, and some come from far, some travel in coach and some in first class (all with significantly different carbon offset calculations). This means that we cannot easily estimate what your footprint will be before you start your tour with us; (2) although we will do the difficult carbon offset calculations, your international flight is a relatively straight-forward calculation, and there needs to be an element of accepting personal responsibility for that action. We believe this is beyond our remit, but your offset could take the form of supporting one of the airlines programs, or you can support one of Tropical Birding's offset initiatives.

We hope that Tropical Birding's friends, loyal clients, and advocates will proudly continue to support the first birding and nature travel company to take this step, and promote us even more strongly.

In addition, we hope that those travelling with our competitors will look at what we are doing and give us a chance, especially if their own travel companies will not match our contributions. We already have an excellent reputation for delivering high quality, life changing holidays. If travelling with us now further means saving forest and contributing to carbon sink initiatives, then surely you should think about trying Tropical Birding.



Call us toll-free on (800) 348-5941, +1-409-515-9110 or email us on info@tropicalbirding.com to talk about forest conservation, carbon offsets, or your next guilt-free birding, bird photography, or Enigmatic Wildlife holiday.