

What is the role of Canadian Travel Agents in Providing Offsets to Travelers?

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In 2006, 26,400 metric tonnes of carbon dioxide were emitted into the atmosphere, of which tourism contributed 5% (UNWTO, 2008). Of that, 5%, air travel was responsible for 40% and land travel for 36%.

The relationship between climate change and tourism is interwoven and interdependent. Climate change has major implications for the future of tourism because weather conditions factor heavily into the business direction of tourism operators. In Canada, seasonal and outdoor tourism may be adversely impacted by abnormal or unpredictable weather patterns, and costly changes to infrastructure may be required to cope with these changes. .

With the growing concern about the effects of climate change and how the tourism industry is vulnerable to these effects, there is a challenge to understand how aware- tourism stakeholders are, and their level of participation in mitigating such effects.

A 2008 study by Kole, L., Krestell, S., Parlagreco, L. and Dodds, R. at Ryerson University aimed to determine the level of awareness Canadian travel agents have regarding climate change, and their willingness to offer carbon offsetting as a mitigation strategy to their clients. The study also aimed to determine whether more information regarding environmental issues and carbon offsetting need to be provided to travel agents to assist them in channeling this knowledge to -consumers.

The study conducted an e-survey to 1886 members of the Association of Canadian Travel Agents (ACTA) and 2,500 members of the Canadian Institute of Travel Counselors (CITC). The study received a 5.9% response rate.

Findings:

The study found that travel agents consider climate change a threat, but they were unaware of the tourism industry's contribution to climate change. Their consumers, the travelers, also did not make the connection between climate change and their travel habits. Most travel agents have a 'basic' understanding (50%) of climate change and carbon offsetting. More than 50% set their first business priority as making a profit. However, 9% of travel agencies set their first priority as 'spreading knowledge of climate change'. 46% of agents felt it was important to communicate environmental issues related to tourism, but are not encouraged to do so by their agencies.

34% of Canadian travel agents believe their customers would be willing to pay up to \$10 as an additional charge for carbon offsets, although they felt that the government should bear the financial costs of carbon offsets. Less than half of

| these agents “sometimes” suggest carbon offsets to their customers, and customers rarely bring up the option of carbon offsets.

The study concludes that most travel agents’ knowledge and understanding of climate change is at a ‘basic’ level, and thus, not sufficiently informed to help transfer knowledge about climate change and carbon offsets to their clients. This is also the main reason that agencies are apprehensive toward presenting carbon offsetting as a viable option. Travel agents need to be well-versed in environmental issues and carbon offsetting in order to be ambassadors of environmental change.

Implications:

In order to increase awareness, a combined effort needs to be initiated between governments, academic institutions and corporations to educate agents about the effects of climate change on tourism and carbon offsetting. As travel agents are representatives at the frontline of the tourism industry, they wield considerable influence over travelers’ actions and awareness of environmental issues.

In order to further mitigation efforts there are a number of approaches to communicate climate change awareness within the tourism industry, and to make climate change and carbon offsetting a fundamental part of the tourism industry:

1. *Education Campaign for Agents* - climate change and mitigation strategies should be part of travel training institutions’ curriculum.
2. *Increase client awareness* through the tourism industry, in order to incorporate this issue into mainstream -culture.
3. *Flat rate fee* for clients for carbon offsetting

Travel agents must realize the influence they have to help mitigate the effects of climate change. Agents can inspire action by educating consumers about how their travels contribute to climate change, and present them with carbon offsetting options to enable them to reduce their carbon emissions.

References:

Kole, L, Krestell, S. Parlagreco, L & Dodds, R (2008) Climate Change and Carbon Offsetting. Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. 49 pages.

United Nations World Tourism Organization (2008). Climate change and tourism: Responding to global challenges. Retrieved from <http://www.untwo.org/index.php>