Air Travel and Global Warming: The EU Is Leading

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Has the EU found a way to get consumers to bear more of the environmental costs of flying?

Summer travel season is upon us, with all the joys and travails that come with spending a perfectly fine vacation day stuck in an airport somewhere. Nevertheless, travel is fun and has plenty of positive sides to it. They range from increased cultural understanding to helping otherwise marginalized regions of the world get a slice of the global vacationer's (or business traveler's) pie.

Yet the current way we do things simply isn’t working. Going to Costa Rica on an “eco-vacation” is but a cruel joke, if getting there requires pushing the very real costs of pollution and noise onto everyone else.

Part of the solution is a shift in the way we look at air travel. Flying from New York to London for a three-hour meeting is absurd, to put it mildly. The cost of one roundtrip business-class ticket could pay for a professional-grade video conferencing system — on both ends.

Voluntarily giving up your seat won’t do, either. Even if you don’t board a plane for that meeting, someone else will be waiting to cross the Atlantic to make the sale. As long as showing up in person is expected practice, a handful of environmentally aware dissenters won’t make a difference on a global scale.

Another option is to voluntarily offset your emissions. That’s a good start. But once again, we cannot rely on volunteers alone. Sooner rather than later, everyone landing at one of the 50,000-odd airports around the world — especially the dozens of major hubs — to take responsibility for cutting
his or her own pollution.

If the world is to avert catastrophic climate shifts, global warming pollution must go down, not up. And global warming impacts from flying are slated to keep going up — unless nations actually put a cap on the carbon emissions of aviation.

That’s exactly what the European Union did as of January 1 of this year. While it’s easy to accuse the Europeans of failing to show global leadership on some issues, aviation pollution is not one of them.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a special agency of the United Nations, was charged by its members in 1997 with regulating the sector’s global warming pollution. But the ICAO has dragged its feet for over a decade.

Europe stepped into this vacuum and extended its carbon emissions trading system to include modest caps on the emissions of all flights within, to, and from the European Union. Next April, airlines will need to tender carbon allowances for this year’s carbon pollution. And they will need to do so for every year through 2020.

The actual cost per transatlantic ticket is tiny — about $3. And airlines could even profit. Some carriers have already incorporated the cost estimate into their pricing.

The EU law covers only about a third of aviation’s global emissions, but it’s a start. The goal, of course, must be worldwide coverage: a global industry requires global regulation.

Rethinking what it means to travel

Last year I took my first flight from New York to Bangkok via Doha, avoiding the usual European hubs. It’s by far the cheapest itinerary. Qatar Airways has gone to great lengths to become a global player, and the decision of the government of Qatar to host the next big UN climate meeting this December will put Qatar Airways’ environmental performance in the spotlight.

Brussels, fortunately, realizes the global dimension of it all: Flights to and from the EU are covered no matter who the carrier is, and the EU law is lending new impetus to efforts in ICAO to try to achieve a global agreement next year. Even if ICAO fails to agree on a target, provisions in the EU law encourage other countries to pursue their own, comparable policies.
Instead of Air India protesting Brussels’ move, New Delhi could take its own steps to limit the carbon pollution of Europe-bound flights from India, and thereby exempt those flights from the European cap. If the Indian government issued and auctioned its own pollution allowances, it could direct the resulting revenues toward addressing the social cost of carbon, especially for its poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

That creates important dynamics. It wouldn’t take long, for instance, for Delhi to decide that it should not treat flights to Frankfurt differently than those to Doha.

This is, of course, a roundabout way of covering the world’s flights. Ideally, the ICAO would put in place an airtight global cap. That may yet happen. But in the meantime, a cascading bottom-up, one-by-one approach may be the best we can do.

A big hope is that all of this prompts a real rethinking of what it means to travel. As much as there is no birthright for cheap gas, there’s none for $250 flights from San Francisco to New York or for £50 ones from London to Barcelona. It’ll be painful to realize that flights will be pricier, but who’s to say that we would not appreciate more spaced out yet longer and relaxed visits? I would think little wrong with spending summers—instead of weekends—in Austria near my parents, and winters—instead of a few days—with my in-laws in Bangkok. It certainly beats outlawing our marriage, as much as it beats polluting the planet beyond recognition.

That’s true for pollution as well. Banning carbon is out. Treating the atmosphere as a free dumpster, though, isn’t an option either. The European Union is showing the way on smart, efficient policy. Let’s hope it’s a first step in trying to change the current situation where all seven billion of us are paying the price for a small and growing number of privileged jet and pollution-setters.

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