



# Airlines' Greenwashing and Contributing to Carbon Pollution

**For Prelims:** [Greenwashing](#), Airlines' Contribution to Carbon Pollution, [Climate Change](#), [GHG](#), [Paris Agreement](#), [SAF](#).

**For Mains:** Concerns over Airlines' Greenwashing and Contributing to Carbon Pollution.

## Why in News?

A lawsuit has been filed against **Delta Air Lines in the US**, accusing the company of engaging in [Greenwashing](#) by making false and misleading claims about its Sustainability Efforts and being a "Green" and carbon-neutral airline.

- The airline claimed to be carbon neutral from March 2020 and offered to offset the carbon emissions from customers' flights.
- However, media reports and investigations have highlighted **loopholes and inaccuracies in Delta's carbon offsetting process**.

## What is Greenwashing?

- The term greenwashing was first used in **1986 by Jay Westerveld, an American environmentalist** and researcher.
- Greenwashing is the practice in which **firms and governments mark all kinds of activities as climate-friendly**, as something that would lead to emissions reduction, or avoidance of emissions.
  - Many of these claims are **unverifiable, misleading**, or dubious.
  - While it helps in boosting the image of the entity, they do nothing in the fight against [climate change](#).
  - Several multinational corporations, including oil giants like Shell and BP, and Coca Cola have faced accusations of greenwashing.
- Greenwashing is prevalent across a **whole range of environmental activities**.
  - Developed countries are **often accused of greenwashing** their normal business investments in developing countries by highlighting climate co-benefits of the financial flows, sometimes with very little justification.
- Greenwashing is **considered an unfair trade practice under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019** in India, which prohibits misleading claims, but implementation of these regulations remains a challenge.

## What are the Concerns Related to Airlines in Carbon Pollution?

- **Major Airlines Indulge in Greenwashing:**
  - Investigations and **studies** in (**Guardian investigation and Greenpeace report**) have revealed **flaws and deceptiveness in the carbon offset systems of major airlines**,

casting doubt on the industry's carbon neutrality assertions.

- Other airlines, including KLM (Netherlands-based airline) and Ryanair (Europe), Air Canada and Swiss Airlines have faced similar allegations of greenwashing and misleading customers with claims of being environmentally friendly.
- These findings raise concerns about the **credibility of the International Air Transport Association's net zero pledge by 2050**, which experts criticized as an act of greenwashing.
- **Airlines Significant Contributors to Carbon Pollution:**
  - Flying is a significant contributor to carbon pollution, in 2021 aviation accounted for over **2% of global energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions according to International Energy Agency (IEA)**.
  - Aviation emissions could grow by **300-700% by 2050**, per estimates.
    - A single round trip from Mumbai to L.A. generates **4.8 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> (equivalent to charging 6,00,000 smartphones)**.
- **Blind Spots in Offset System:**
  - There is a **lack of universally recognized standards** and tracking mechanisms for counting carbon offsets, making it difficult to ensure additionality—the reduction of emissions that would not have occurred otherwise.
  - Certification organizations play a role in connecting buyers and sellers of carbon credits, but the **oversight and verification processes have been criticized for allowing misleading projects** and phantom credits.

## What are Carbon Credits?

- Carbon Credits (Carbon offsets) are received by the companies when they invest in offset projects such as environmental conservation, energy efficiency or renewable energy which **reduce, avoid, or remove greenhouse gas emissions from the atmosphere**.
- These credits represent the **amount of carbon dioxide that would have been removed from the atmosphere** through these initiatives.
- Each credit is equivalent to **one metric ton of CO<sub>2</sub>**, which contributes to global warming.
- Companies use these credits to offset their carbon emissions in one area, like airplane travel, by claiming that they are reducing emissions somewhere else, such as in distant rainforests.
  - The voluntary carbon-offset market is expected **to grow significantly, from USD 2 billion** in 2020 to approximately USD 250 billion by 2050, according to a report by Morgan Stanley in 2023.

## How does Greenwashing Affect Carbon Credits?

- **Informal Markets:**
  - There are credits available for all kinds of activities such as for growing trees, for planting a certain kind of crop, for installing **energy-efficient equipment in office buildings**.
    - The credits for such activities are often certified by **unofficial third-party companies** and sold to others.
    - Such transactions have been flagged for **lack of integrity and double counting**.
- **Credibility:**
  - Countries like India or Brazil had accumulated **huge carbon credits under the Kyoto Protocol** and wanted these to be transitioned to the new market being set up under the **Paris Agreement**.
    - But many developed countries resisted this, questioning the integrity of the credits and claiming they did not **accurately represent reductions in emissions**.
- **Lead to Lack of Transparency:**
  - Greenwashing can lead to a **lack of transparency in the carbon offset market**.
  - Companies may provide **limited information about the projects** they support, making it difficult to verify their **claims and assess** the actual environmental impact.
  - This lack of transparency **undermines the credibility and trustworthiness** of the carbon credit system.
- **Diversion from Real Emission Reductions:**
  - Greenwashing practices may divert attention and resources away from genuine efforts to reduce carbon emissions.

- Companies may rely on carbon credits as a way to offset their emissions without making significant changes to their operations or adopting more sustainable practices.
- This can impede progress toward meaningful emission reductions and the transition to a low-carbon economy.

## Way Forward

- The complex nature of carbon **offsetting and the lack of consensus on effective standards** present challenges in implementing and enforcing regulations. Therefore, there is a need for better regulation, transparency, and understanding of carbon offset programs.
- The focus should shift **towards decarbonizing commercial aviation** through **Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF)**, hydrogen, and full-electric propulsion techniques, despite the obstacles faced by these alternatives.
- As the push for environmental sustainability grows, there is a need for better regulation, scrutiny, and development of **more impactful strategies to reduce aviation's carbon footprint**.

## UPSC Civil Services Examination Previous Year Question (PYQ)

**Q. Regarding “carbon credits”, which one of the following statements is not correct? (2011)**

- (a)** The carbon credit system was ratified in conjunction with the Kyoto Protocol
- (b)** Carbon credits are awarded to countries or groups that have reduced greenhouse gases below their emission quota
- (c)** The goal of the carbon credit system is to limit the increase of carbon dioxide emission
- (d)** Carbon credits are traded at a price fixed from time to time by the United Nations Environment Programme.

**Ans: (d)**

**Source: TH**

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