



BY KATE ROGERS GESSERT

Traveling Lightly

Vacationing relatively guilt-free

This spring, I've heard more and more people worrying about the impact of their vacation plans on climate change. No big changes yet, but at least we're worrying. "I asked my family if we could spend our summer vacation on the Oregon Coast. But well, we're going to Costa Rica." "Europe is a long way to fly, but once we're there, we'll go hiking and camping." And me? I insisted we take Amtrak to a May wedding in California, though if the train is late, I'll miss teaching my evening class. I had planned to stay home from a friend's June wedding in New York state, but then my grown kids on the East Coast asked us to visit. To get there in a reasonable amount of time, we'll fly – adding vastly to our annual contribution to global warming.

Thirty-eight percent of Oregon's carbon dioxide emissions come from cars, trucks, and buses. In the U.S., we drive an average of 12,500 miles per vehicle per year in cars and light trucks (including SUVs and minivans) with average fuel efficiency of 22.5 miles and 17.4 miles a gallon respectively. Each passenger mile traveled in a car releases one pound of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, with roughly half a pound per passenger mile for train and intercity bus travel, and somewhat more than a pound per passenger mile for airplanes.

Airplanes contributed 10 percent of U.S. CO2 emissions in 2002. International flights are exempted from the Kyoto accord, though with aircraft emissions expected to increase five percent a year, they may cancel out Kyoto's progress. Carbon dioxide and other polluting gases spewed into the rarified air of the stratosphere have climate-change impacts far greater than ground-level emissions, which are partly absorbed by trees and oceans. Jets' vapor trails may trap warmth near the Earth's surface. Airports are enormous sources of air and noise pollution, bringing a wide range of health woes to the millions who live nearby.

Transportation choices about vacations bring many truly uncomfortable choices together. How can we say no to our families? "I can't come see you. It's bad for the atmosphere." Can we refuse our own desires for relaxation and adventure? Well, at least in Mexico or Bali? On the web and in conversations, I hear about alternatives and compromises: local bicycle and raft trips; train and bus travel; packing more passengers into fuel-efficient cars; teleconferences for business meetings; one longer vacation a year rather than several short ones, so people can stay longer when they travel far; renting hybrid cars (1-877-EV-RENTAL) and sailing on small, "green" cruise ships (www.clippercruise.com).

We can also enjoy global culture at home, where we can visit Willamette Valley ethnic festivals, enjoy a multitude of international concerts and restaurants, and make friends with people from many lands through LCC's English as a Second Language volunteer tutor program (463-5919) and the Friendship Foundation for International Students at UO (346-3206.) Best of all, our home state has enough beautiful wild places for many lifetimes of explorations.

One excellent way to mitigate travel effects is carbon offsets. Alternative energy nonprofits have created dozens of websites where you can calculate your carbon spending in automobile and airplane travel, then purchase an equivalent number of carbon credits. Nonprofits use these credits in various ways. Some plant and preserve trees (www.futureforests.com), an appealing but impermanent remedy: Trees remove carbon from the atmosphere until they are burned. Others fund wind power and energy-efficient building retrofits.

My favorite site so far is www.carboncounter.org, a collaborative effort of two Portland-based nonprofits, Climate Trust and Mercy Corps. Mercy Corps, an international relief organization, became involved "to reduce the threats millions face from climate-related disasters." Carbon Counter's projects, mostly here in the Northwest, include weatherizing Portland multi-family housing and commercial buildings; retrofitting a paper mill to decrease energy use while increasing utilization of recycled paper; and restoring riparian forests on the Deschutes and in Ecuador. Other excellent sites include www.greentagsusa.org and betterworldclub.com, a green alternative to AAA that offers carbon offsets with air reservations and car insurance.

With world travel and communications, our lives have opened and flourished. I don't think we can stop traveling. The best we can do, I believe, is to ponder how we can sometimes get the good experiences that come from travel at home or close to home, and to take our longer trips with restraint, realizing that in this area, as in so many others, we hold our planet's future in our hands.

Shades of Green is a monthly column about ways we can make our lives more ecologically sustainable. Send ideas and feedback to shadesofgreen@eugeneweekly.com

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