

Aviation and our Environment.

Is modern air travel killing the planet? Is flying the reserve of the rich or should it be an efficiently managed resource for us all? Roger Wiltshire, Secretary General of the British Air Transport Association puts the airlines view in the debate.

The desire to travel is nothing new. Airlines and travel companies discovered the public interest in broadening their horizons and seeing the world many years ago and with prices, in many cases, lower than 20 years ago, flying is now far more accessible. Frequent and efficient connections remains an important factor for business in our increasingly global economy but flying is no longer the right of the rich or famous, despite what the environmental lobby would have you believe. Most of us have flown and more than half the UK population takes at least one flight every year.

When we fly we pay for the full costs of the industry including airports and air traffic control. There is no subsidy from the taxpayer and air travel is generally treated the same as other forms of public transport (such as trains) when it comes to VAT or fuel tax. But there is one difference – Air Passenger Duty (APD). This environmental tax was introduced in the 1990s and today ranges from £5 for a shorthaul economy flight to £40 for a longhaul premium ticket. APD raises almost £1 billion in tax each year – equivalent to over one and a half times the cost of the carbon dioxide emitted on the flight for which it is levied – and not a penny is used to address environmental concerns.

Flying, like most human activity, has an effect on our environment. It is the degree of effect and how we should deal with it which is the bone of contention. Climate change is the big issue, not just for air travel but for all activity that emits greenhouse gases. To put things into perspective, air travel accounts for just 3% of global carbon dioxide emissions – a fact that is often ignored by commentators. Aircraft are 50% more fuel efficient and also much quieter than they were 30 years ago but demand for air travel has grown and that growth is expected to continue.

UK airlines take these issues very seriously and, together with the airports, aerospace industry and air traffic control, launched Sustainable Aviation, a sustainability strategy for the industry, in June 2005.

The strategy has a two-pronged approach to climate change. First, we are aiming for another 50% improvement in fuel efficiency by 2020 through improved design of aircraft, engines and the way we operate. We also want to see air travel included in an international scheme designed to control total greenhouse gas concentrations. These schemes, like the one introduced in Europe in 2005, limit total emissions for all activity in the scheme and any company wanting to emit

more has to buy permits from those able to reduce their emissions. There will be a cost to this approach and one that air travellers will pay, as they pay for all the other costs of air travel today. But this is the most efficient approach and, unlike taxation, it will make a direct contribution to the control of emissions.

Before it is included in such an international solution you may want to “offset” the emissions from your next flight through one of the schemes now available.

Air travel is a natural extension of our development. We must manage its impact responsibly and intelligently. If we do that air travel can continue to be the convenient, economic and environmentally responsible method of long distance transport it should be in the modern world. If we choose the efficient way forward future generations will be able to see the world and meet their responsibilities to our environment.

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