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## A New Way to Ask, 'How Green Is My Conscience?'

By CHRISTINE LARSON

WHEN Anne Pashby moved to Baltimore last year, she was dismayed by the complexity of recycling in her new city.

"I can never get it right about which day is paper versus cardboard versus cans," said Ms. Pashby, 38, a human resources manager. "So I've given up on it."

But she wasn't ready to give up on the environment. Looking for an easier way to make her life greener, she tried a "carbon calculator" at the Web site of the Conservation Fund ([conservationfund.org](http://conservationfund.org)). She learned that the events of her everyday life, like driving the car, heating her home or taking plane trips, produced about 14 tons a year of carbon emissions, or "carbon footprint." The Conservation Fund, a nonprofit group in Arlington, Va., offered to neutralize that amount for \$57, by planting 11 trees in the lower Mississippi Valley — enough to remove 14 tons of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. She happily complied.

"It felt pretty good," she said. "I could pat myself on the back and not lay out a whole lot of cash."

Call them green upgrades: easy ways for consumers to help the environment without changing their behavior. Such upgrades have been proliferating: Skiers, for example, can spend an extra \$2 at some resorts to offset the pollution produced in a drive to the mountains; the money goes to environmental organizations. On Web sites like [TerraPass.com](http://TerraPass.com) or [CoolDriver.org](http://CoolDriver.org), drivers can total a car's pollution for a year and direct a corresponding sum to clean-energy projects.

Similar opportunities to become "climate neutral" can be found at concerts, music festivals and sports events, and even while shopping: On June 9, [Gaiam](http://Gaiam), a retailer in Broomfield, Colo., that sells products including solar lighting and organic cotton sheets, started offering a \$2 "carbon neutral" shipping option, with the money going to the Conservation Fund to plant trees.

Green upgrades appeal to a sense of personal responsibility. "I like the idea that I pollute this much, so I pay this much," said Morgan Waters, 36, a physician from Sacramento. Last fall, he paid about \$40 through TerraPass, a Web-based, for-profit company in Menlo Park, Calif., to offset emissions from his Volkswagen Jetta. TerraPass channels the money to projects promoting green power and industrial efficiency. He also pays an extra \$6 a month to his local electric company for renewable energy.

The challenge for consumers is to understand exactly what their money goes for, and how much the upgrades actually help the environment.

Some are easy to grasp. At the Lenox, a hotel in Boston, the Eco Chic package, at \$309, costs more than a usual one-night stay (\$239 and up). In return, guests get breakfast, passes for Boston public transportation — so they don't have to drive a car — and a copy of "The Consumer's Guide to Effective Environmental Choices: Practical Advice from the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#)." And the hotel buys enough renewable power to offset the greenhouse gas produced during the guest's stay: about 52 pounds of carbon emissions a night.

Other green upgrades may be more complicated.

"I was thinking about buying green energy, but when I looked into it, I found so many different options," said Zoë Chafe of Washington, a researcher at the Worldwatch Institute, an environmental research group. "Some were through the electric company; others were saying, 'Put your money here and you'll help us start a manure farm that will generate alternative energy.' "

About 20 percent of the nation's utilities offer customers so-called green power. In Sacramento, Dr. Waters participates in the Greenergy program offered by the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, which totals his electricity use and tries to buy an equivalent amount of power from a wind farm or other renewable-energy supplier. But there aren't enough clean-power plants in Sacramento, so the utility also buys renewable-energy certificates, or "green tags," from wind farms elsewhere. The tags certify that a clean-energy company somewhere sold a certain quantity of power.

When consumers lack the option locally, they can buy their own green tags or other "carbon offset products," like financing efforts for clean-energy projects and reforestation elsewhere in the country. For instance, Ms. Chafe came across NativeEnergy, a private company whose majority owners are 11 Native American tribes in the Dakotas, Nebraska and Wyoming. For \$8 a month, it offsets 100 percent of customers' electrical use by supporting farm methane projects that harness gas produced by cow manure. The company is based in Charlotte, Vt.

Some choices can be overwhelming. Two months after moving, Ms. Chafe is still buying conventional power. "I'm trying to understand exactly where my money is going before I make a decision," she said.

It can be even harder to sort through the many groups vying to shrink your carbon footprint. Clif Bar, a company in Berkeley, Calif., that sells energy bars, also sells \$2 "Cool Tags" at concerts and sports events to offset the cost of the drive; the money goes to NativeEnergy for wind farms. Sites like [Carbonfund.org](#) and [GreenTagsUSA.org](#) have carbon calculators to estimate pollution and offer products to offset it. [Ford Motor](#) has a partnership with TerraPass to encourage drivers to buy carbon offsets.

So many players have entered this market that consumers can shop around. Ms. Pashby, the human resources

manager in Baltimore who offset her 14-ton carbon footprint for \$57 through the Conservation Fund, would have spent \$200 through GreenTagsUSA.org, a Web site sponsored by the Bonneville Environmental Foundation, a nonprofit group that supports renewable energy, or \$77 through Carbonfund.org, a nonprofit organization that promotes ways to reduce or offset carbon emissions.

Although these vendors all seem to sell the same thing, the approaches can vary. Some, like the Conservation Fund, plant trees to absorb carbon. Others, like TerraPass and NativeEnergy, try to avoid pollution in the first place by backing certain energy projects through green tags and other methods. Some groups, like Carbonfund.org, try to do both.

Ms. Pashby chose the Conservation Fund because "trees are better looking than wind farms." But it's not clear which option is better for the planet.

"The challenge for consumers is that there is no uniformly accepted standard for what constitutes a valid reduction in [global warming](#) pollution," said Daniel Lashof, science director of the climate center of the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#). The exceptions, he added, are green tags carrying the Green-e certification, a seal of approval issued by the Center for Resource Solutions, a nonprofit group based in San Francisco that verifies that clean-power companies sell the amount of power they say they do.

That label, however, is limited to green tags, and doesn't apply to companies that sell a mix of projects. Those involving reforestation can be especially difficult to verify.

"There's not a whole lot of great tracking for building forests in Costa Rica," said Brendan Bell, associate Washington representative of the [Sierra Club's](#) global warming and energy issues program. "How do you know the same acre isn't being sold to a bunch of people?"

Some marketers are trying to improve accountability. The Conservation Fund sends certificates to supporters, telling them when and where their trees were planted. TerraPass has transactions verified by the Center for Resource Solutions. And the Climate Neutral Network, an independent nonprofit group in Portland, Ore., has developed a "Climate Cool" certification for carbon offset products, though it has not been widely adopted. The Center for Resource Solutions is also developing an offset certification similar to Green-e that it hopes to introduce this summer.

"We're trying to develop standards so we can make this transparent and not have scandals that destroy the market," said Lars Kvale, an analyst at the Center for Resource Solutions.

ACCOUNTABILITY may be especially important in the for-profit arena. NativeEnergy, TerraPass and others profit by buying and then reselling green tags and other investments.

"I was very surprised to hear later that TerraPass is a for-profit company," Dr. Waters, the Sacramento doctor, said. "That may very well have affected my decision to buy. I like to think that every nickel of what I'm doing goes to support the cause."

TerraPass says that it tries to inform all customers about its for-profit status, and that its business model has allowed it to attract capital, grow faster and thus better serve the environment.

For now, at least, that is good enough for Dr. Waters. "It makes me feel like I'm doing something, and it feels very personal," he said. "I'd like to think that when it's time to renew, I'll comparison shop and find the group that's most efficient."

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