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Sandbagged: Dealing a blow to carbon trading

Bryony Worthington, who has lived and breathed emissions trading every day for the past decade, has had enough. She tells Leo Hickman why

Leo Hickman

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Bryony Worthington ... 'offsetting can be more evil than doing nothing'. Photograph: Martin Godwin

If you ever try to discuss carbon emissions trading you are soon left feeling as if you're wading through a giant bowl of Alphabeti Spaghetti. The subject drips with acronyms: CDM, ROCs, EU ETS, CRC, EUAs, CERs. Rumour has it that some ministers have been known to carry cribsheets into high-level discussions to protect themselves against this blizzard of jargon - and who can blame them?

It can be such a, let's be frank, dull and impenetrable subject that there are those who believe the obfuscation is intentional, to repel prying eyes from exposing the murky workings of the only truly international system up and running that's designed, by curbing greenhouse gas emissions via the "cap and trade" principle, to protect us against runaway climate change.

Bryony Worthington, who has inhaled the fug of emissions trading every day for the past decade, first as an environmental campaigner, then as a government official, and finally as a lobbyist for a giant energy firm, has had enough.

Using her unique knowledge of how "this game" works, she wants to expose its underbelly and help to spark greater debate about what, she believes, is a vitally important component of our collective fight against climate change.

"Sunlight is the best disinfectant," she says, sitting inside her temporary new 'office', a corner in her local pub in north London. "If you open all this process up to the public and show them what's happening, then you stand a much better chance of cleaning this up."

Permits to pollute

Next week, Worthington launches Sandbag.org.uk, a not-for-profit website that allows members to buy up surplus "permits to pollute" that form the currency of the European Union's emissions trading scheme (or EU ETSs). Members can then "retire" them so that they cannot continue to be traded between the industrial polluters - cement, steel and car manufacturers etc - forced by EU regulation to operate within the system. "I suppose it's a bit like burning money in front of someone so they can't spend it on something bad," she explains.

The concept sounds like a clever variation of carbon offsetting, the now mocked method of allowing people to atone for their "carbon sins" - flying, driving, heating - by letting them pay for, say, a tree to be planted, or someone else, often in a developing country, to reduce emissions on their behalf.

Worthington is sensitive to the charge. "We've deliberately tried not to look like an offsetting website," she says, adding that some offsetting firms can, in her view, be "more evil than doing nothing" due to the often neo-imperialistic veneer of some of the offsetting projects they fund in the developing world.

"There's no carbon calculator on our site, for example. My pitch is simply that if you haven't got a lot of time, but do have a credit card, you can take, say, a tonne of carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere in a second by paying for an emissions credit to be withdrawn from the system." At the current rate of trading in the EU ETS, a tonne of carbon is priced at about €23 (£18), around twice the average price to offset a tonne of CO₂ as charged by an offsetting company.

"I really want to distance Sandbag from the term 'offsetting'. Most schemes today are simply saying to someone in a country such as India, 'You can't use a diesel pump for your water hole. Use this hand pump instead because we're trying to get carbon emissions down'. So these people end up using a more labour-intensive device so that we can drive down to Sainsbury's to pick up some Evian? That's just wrong."

She sees Sandbag's role as offering a platform to help people subvert, agitate and campaign against the imperfections and injustices embedded in the current emissions trading scheme. She would far prefer to use the collective voice of future Sandbag members to coax the big industrial polluters into handing over their surplus credits than have to rely on members to buy them. But, I put to her, surely this is an idealistic dream? Why on earth would these firms with surplus credits - which Worthington estimates to be about two-thirds of the 300-odd firms currently operating within the EU ETS - wish to give up the chance to earn millions by selling them?

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