



Education Images/UIG, via Getty

READ THIS. *list*

- 1 Save The Rainforests For 100 Bucks
by Vlad Chituc
- 2 The Anti-Muslim Nut In Bundy's Militia
by Anna Bird, Kate Briquetelet
- 3 A Gift Guide For Italophiles
from The Daily Best
- 4 John Oliver Rips New Year's Resolutions
by Matt Wilstein
- 5 More Kids For Will And Kate In 2016?
by Tom Sykes

CLIMATE 2 . 2162 .:1052 A M
CHANGE E T



Vlad Chituc



Save the Rainforests for 100 Bucks

A U.K.-based NGO can offset the \$100 or less.

After 13 days of heated negotiations, the Paris COP21 Climate talks ended with an ambitious plan to curb the rise of greenhouse gas emissions.

Heralded as a “historic turning point” by the French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius, the agreement aims to phase out coal, gas, and oil in favor of renewable forms of energy, aiming to keep the global temperature rise to no more than 2 degrees Celsius, ideally less than 1.5.

While the pledge isn't actually binding—in part because of efforts to avoid a review by the Republican-controlled Senate—it's the first climate change agreement to be unanimously approved by 195 countries. The social and economic pressure stemming from this, what Richard Branson called “[The Paris Effect](#),” signals to businesses and governments that the future (read: money) is in renewable alternatives to carbon emissions. The response from [coal lobbyists](#) is an encouraging indication that it might be working.

But climate change and energy policy feel almost necessarily abstract and distant—you or I can't make the Republican Party join the global scientific consensus on man-made climate change, nor can we stop the coal industry and bolster clean energy—all of which makes it easy to feel disillusioned and powerless.

It turns out, however, that a U.K.-based NGO lets us have a tangible impact not just on greenhouse gas emissions, but the economies in the developing world. According to William MacAskill, a philosophy professor at Oxford and author of the recent book, *Doing Good Better*, a charity called “[Cool Earth](#)” could offset the carbon footprint of the average American for a modest \$100 donation.

Founded by Jonah Eliasch, a businessman, and Frank Field, a British Member

of Parliament, Cool Earth operates by helping local communities in regions at risk for deforestation find economic alternatives to logging.

Though it seems counterintuitive, it makes more sense on reflection. Local communities don't destroy the environments they live in because they *want* to; instead, it's an understandable response to a lack of economic opportunity. So long as exploitation of natural resources is the only source of income for parts of the developing world, substantive change will be difficult.

Cool Earth helps to change that. Each story in each village is a little different, but one instance, detailed in *The Times* by Debora Ross ([PDF](#)), involved a village in Peru. A local tribe was considering an offer from a logging company, and Cool Earth matched the offer within one week. The villagers stored that money in a trust, using it on education, medicine, and infrastructure. The money also helped to secure their rights to the land and transport the cocoa they grew to different markets, allowing them to generate more income so that they wouldn't need to rely on logging in the future.

In 2014, Cool Earth expanded its work to the Democratic Republic of Congo, and this past year they began work in Papua New Guinea.

It's easy to underestimate the carbon impact of deforestation, but [the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization estimates](#) that deforestation contributes up to 30 percent of carbon emitted each year. [According to the World Wildlife Fund](#), 48 football fields of trees are cut down every minute. Estimates suggest that without the rainforests, the carbon dioxide emissions would have risen 10 percent faster ([PDF](#)).

Deforestation poses two problems to global warming. First, trees absorb carbon dioxide for respiration, turning carbon dioxide turned into sugar, cellulose, and other carbohydrates (which contain carbon). This helps mitigate the danger posed by existing carbon emissions, so when trees get cut down, we're limiting our ability to offset the harms of existing emissions—like we're leaving our carbon footprint in mud instead of dirt.

Second, when those trees are cut down and burned, the carbon those trees stored is released back into the atmosphere. So not only does deforestation handicap a valuable carbon offset, we're emitting the greenhouse gases that we'd otherwise have prevented from going into the atmosphere.

Cool Earth operates helping local communities in regions at risk for deforestation find economic alternatives to logging.

According to Cool Earth's estimates, however, \$100 can prevent one acre of rainforest from being cut down (and each acre contains about 260 metric tons of CO₂). MacAskill's own estimates, however, are intentionally conservative. His organization, Giving What We Can, analyzed Cool Earth's impact as critically as possible, and, scaling down for as many potential factors as possible, determined that \$206 could prevent half of an acre of rainforest from being cut down.

Being even more conservative, still, MacAskill assumed a 300 percent margin of error on their estimate, so all

said and done, they estimated that for a \$5 donation, one metric ton of CO2 emissions could be prevented. Since the average American emits about 20 metric tons of carbon dioxide each year, an annual \$100 donation to Cool Earth makes you carbon-neutral.

Clearly a lot of assumptions are contained in these estimates, but none are unreasonable and the final figure is much more conservative than Cool Earth's, which would suggest it'd take less than \$10 to offset a year's worth of carbon emissions. At any rate, it's more effective than other strategies for cutting emissions. Buying local produce does little, since only about 10 percent of food's carbon footprint comes from transportation, and cutting beef and dairy from your diet for one week will do more than eating local all year.

Get The Daily Beast In Your Daily Beast

Enter your email

SUBSCRIBE



Cutting beef from your diet for a full year, however, will only reduce your carbon footprint by just one metric ton, which means you'd need to be vegetarian for 20 years to have the same effect as donating \$100 to Cool Earth. You'd need to recycle regularly for about 50 years or walk to and from work or school (assuming a three-mile round-trip commute) for more than 60 years to have the same impact.

This is a startling possibility, but such efforts haven't gone uncriticized. Journalists like George Monbiot have notably compared carbon offsetting to the Catholic Church's practice of selling indulgences, but this criticism misses the point. Indulgences would be a great idea, actually, if a certain accumulated amount of sin would lead to a global apocalypse. In that situation, anyone complaining about utilizing indulgences because we should stop sinning so much would be letting their own self-righteousness take precedence over the safety and wellbeing of the world.

That's the position we're in now with climate change, though, and the danger is impending. I suspect the inhabitants of low-lying Pacific islands are more concerned with not having their homes swallowed than whether Westerners are being sufficiently virtuous in their consumption.

So more than being the ideal passive-aggressive Christmas gift for the climate-change-denying uncle in your life, a donation to Cool Earth is maybe the most effective thing a concerned citizen can do to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. So while we wait for the big players in government and industry to do their part to fight climate change, there's a lot we can do to help the world keep global temperatures under the 1.5 degree target set at the Paris summit.



PROMOTED STORIES