

Tracking carbon footprints in hotels

New programs urge guests to reduce, offset energy use

Jane Engle, Los Angeles Times
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Every day you stay at a hotel, you might burn enough fossil fuels to release more than 33 pounds of carbon dioxide, the bad boy of global warming, into the atmosphere.

But don't worry. Open your wallet and all is forgiven -- or at least that's the pitch of a growing number of programs.

Among the latest is TravelGreen, announced in February by Sustainable Travel International, a nonprofit company in Boulder, Colo. It markets what it dubs Mini-Green Tags to hotels and guests. The proceeds, it says, will fund conservation and renewable energy, such as solar and wind power.

The idea is based on so-called "carbon offsets" that Expedia and other companies offer as optional purchases to customers who travel by air. Such offsets, designed to help counter carbon-dioxide emissions that travel generates, are spreading through the lodging industry.

Since March, Rezidor Hotel Group, a Belgian firm that runs Radisson, Regent and other chain hotels in the Middle East, Europe and Africa, has allowed guests in these regions to use loyalty points to buy carbon offsets through London's CarbonNeutral Co.

Leading Hotels of the World, a New York marketing association of 440 luxury hotels, was planning to implement TravelGreen in April. And at Bonneville Hot Springs Resort in Bonneville, Wash., which helped pilot the program, some guests attending a conference last fall bought Mini-Green Tags.

But what were they really buying? And should you buy in too?

The answer is complicated. Such efforts are helpful but not a panacea, some activists say.

"These kinds of programs are useful tools for raising awareness about global warming," said Jenny Powers, spokeswoman for the Natural Resources Defense Council in New York. "But the first goal should be to reduce your (carbon) footprint."

As a guest, you can reduce your footprint by patronizing hotels that reuse towels, recycle water and waste, garden with drought-resistant plants, use solar heat and take other conservation measures.

Look for action, not talk, said Brian T. Mullis, president of Sustainable Travel International: "Are they engaged in sustainability or 'green-washing'?"

Among hoteliers highly regarded for conservation is Xanterra Parks & Resorts, a Denver company that



uses alternative energy and tracks waste output at its lodges in Yellowstone, Grand Canyon and other national parks. A few hotels, such as the Orchard Garden in San Francisco, are built to eco-friendly guidelines.

Despite these initiatives, Mullis said, "The bottom line is that some amount of greenhouse gas is inevitable."

Just how much takes some calculating, much of it theoretical. On the basis of government statistics on energy use, and figuring that a typical hotel room might be 300 square feet, Mullis estimated that a one-day stay uses 29.3 kilowatt-hours, resulting in the release of 33.7 pounds of carbon dioxide. The cost to offset that with renewable energy is about 48 cents, he added.

Mullis expects Mini-Green Tags to retail for \$1. Depending on how the hotel runs the program, fewer than 43 cents might go to alternative energy funded through the program's partners, the nonprofit Bonneville Environmental Foundation in Portland, Ore., and MyClimate, a Swiss nonprofit.

Indeed, a TravelGreen brochure touts "additional revenue" for hotels. One version would work like this, Mullis said: His company sells tags to hotels for 50 cents per tag, of which 42.5 cents goes to eco projects and 7.5 cents covers program costs. The remaining 50 cents of the \$1 that the guest pays goes to the hotel, an amount that, "We hope they'll use (for eco projects)," he added.

Leading Hotels of the World plans to absorb the full cost, said Marshall Calder, senior vice president of marketing. He said it would donate 50 cents for each night's stay booked on its new Web site, www.lhwgreen.com; by phone using a special code; or through a link on www.sustainabletravelinternational.org -- but not on Leading Hotels' main Web site.

The booking data allow them "to measure consumers' enthusiasm" for sustainable tourism, Calder said.

However hotels handle carbon offsets, there's potential to do well by doing good. Sales of Mini-Green Tags, Mullis said, will develop wind power in Washington and Oregon and build hydroelectric power stations in India.

They also might help eco-guilty guests sleep more easily -- after switching off all the lights

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