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Cleaner flights

AIR travel is extremely unkind to the climate, no thanks to the aviation fuel used to power jets. A single long haul flight can emit more carbon per passenger than months of SUV driving, with 3.15kg of carbon dioxide emitted for every kilogramme of fuel burnt.

Though aviation is responsible for only 2% of global greenhouse gas emissions, in many countries it is the fastest-growing single source – and with the ongoing expansion of budget airline AirAsia, that growth is unlikely to abate in Malaysia.

There is growing pressure for airlines to rein in carbon pollution. Already, the European Union plans to subject the aviation industry to its emissions trading scheme from 2012. This will require carriers in its airspace to offset emissions over their entire journey.

Airlines are trying out climate-friendlier fuels but no alternatives are expected in the next 10 to 15 years. Since people still need to fly, the next best thing is to make their flights carbon-neutral by donating to a carbon offset project.

Since June, passengers of Malaysia Airlines, Firefly and MASwings can make such voluntary payments. For as little as RM5, you can offset the carbon discharged when you fly to Kota Kinabalu, while to London it is under RM36.

"The project provides a channel for the public, government and private sector to get together to support an environmental scheme," says Dr Ooi Teong Siew, general manager of the health and environment division of MAS.

The money will fund conservation of the south-east Pahang peat swamp forest, one of the largest tracts of peatland in the country. MAS in January handed RM80,000 to the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM), the technical adviser for the peat swamp project. Of that sum, RM50,000 was a donation from Shell, RM25,000 was from the offsets of MAS staff's duty travel and RM5,000

was offsets purchased by passengers.

Ooi says less than 1% of total passengers carbon-neutralised their flights in the first six months of the offset scheme. He had expected more foreign passengers to purchase offsets but surprisingly, just as many Malaysians did. He puts it down to higher awareness and affordability. He adds that incorporating offset purchases into the online flight booking process would make it easier for passengers to sign up in future. Now customers must take the extra effort to click on an icon.

Ooi says MAS has introduced fuel-saving measures such as reducing aircraft weight and flying direct routes, in response to the fuel crisis, and this has indirectly shrunk the airline's carbon footprint.

FRIM deputy director-general Dr Abdul Rahim Nik says funds from the MAS carbon offset venture will support rehabilitation of the south-east Pahang peat swamps. He says some 10,000ha of logged sites will be replanted to create corridors to link the Pekan, Nenasi, Resak and Kedondong reserves into a contiguous forest.

Natural Resources and Environment Ministry undersecretary Dr Lian Kok Fei says a committee comprising the ministry, MAS and the United Nations Development Programme will vet other eligible projects for the carbon offset venture.

"The committee will be flexible in the choice of projects. Our principle is for sustainable development. A project may not involve direct measurements of carbon but if it contributes to sustainable development and preserves the environment, it will be consid-



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Too much gas: Aircrafts are a significant source of heat-trapping gases and there are moves to require airlines to offset emissions from their fleet.