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Getting it green

While conservationists are mauling the aviation industry in the West, Asia is proving that air travel can be more eco-friendly.

By ANDREW PONNAMPALAM

Conservationists and eco-campaigners recently won a High Court battle over plans for a third runway at London's Heathrow Airport, citing a host of reasons that include aviation emissions, noise pollution, carbon generation and loss of greenery.

The European Union is considering what have been described as draconian plans to limit airlines' carbon emissions from 2011, and recently an EU member-country doubled its air-passenger fees, with gleeful politicians comparing this expensive levy on air-travel to "sin taxes" for things like tobacco and gambling.

In England, there is even an extreme group that tries to discourage everybody and anybody from flying. Plane Stupid is the name of a direct-action pressure group that boasts that it is "taking action against aviation's climate impact" by demanding a total and complete "end to short-haul flights and airport expansion" by the entire human race.

In 2008, a Plane Stupid campaigner super-glued himself to Prime Minister

Gordon Brown in the State Dining Room of the

Prime Minister's official residence at 10, Downing Street to advance the group's cause. Plain stupid they may seem, but such wacky groups are effectively joining forces with a spectrum of environmental activists to generate increasing controversy and opposition to air travel in the western world.

Although many western aviation companies employ excellent green practices, the industry seems to be on the defensive.

Aviation players in Asia, however, are fighting back.

The chief executive of Hong Kong carrier Cathay Pacific Tony Tyler, says that the aviation industry has been unfairly demonised for its role in climate change, and that a more rational debate is required.

"I get really fed up with things that are written or said in some parts of the world about aviation's responsibility for climate change," he says.

"Aviation in Europe has become public enemy No 1. In actual fact, the aviation industry is responsible for just 2% of global carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions, compared to the much bigger emitters such as power-generation."

He adds that Cathay Pacific itself has improved energy efficiency and introduced measures to offset its carbon emissions.

Some time ago, Japan Airlines became the first airline to conduct a demonstration flight using a biofuel that combines three sustainable biofuels: camelina (84%), jatropha (less than 16%), and algae (less than 1%). No modifications to the aircraft or engine were required for the biofuel, which is a drop-in replacement for petroleum-based fuel.

In October last year, the first JAL ASPIRE Green Flight took off, seeking

to reduce CO₂ emissions by 13,140kg and total fuel consumption by 5,362 litres by implementing a range of environment-friendly practices.

For the passengers, the experience began with a Special Green Counter and paperless ticketing. Even the vehicles used for support services were certified as environment-friendly, and on board, cabin crew carried the message of conservation; there was maximum use of recyclable materials for meals; waste was separated in the aircraft and the duty-free bags were recyclable. Even the weight of magazines carried on board had been reduced.

Fuel-usage was reduced by a variety of methods. On the ground, the aircraft was pushed back from the terminal and towed as far as possible

while the takeoff was on reduced flaps to burn less fuel. The aircraft itself had been prepared further by a full wash of its fuselage and engines to reduce wind drag while in flight. More such flights have been scheduled, with JAL planning to eventually implement the eco-friendly knowledge gained on all flights.

In 2007, Air India was awarded the prestigious Montreal Protocol Public Awareness Award by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in recognition of its efforts in environmental protection, particularly of the ozone layer.

To the south, SriLankan Airlines is now formulating a comprehensive environmental policy. A special Environmental Team has also been appointed to drive the effort.

A SriLankan spokesman says, "Our Green Policy is being formulated to take us to a position of environmental excellence in the global airline industry."

Most people are unaware that Malaysia has been among the world's leaders in environment-friendly

> MORE ON NEXT PAGE

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Clockwise fom top: The Kuala Lumpur International Airport jungle walk inside the Satellite Terminal; the ERL is among the cleanest and greenest airport commuter systems in the world; the Airport Within A Forest And A Forest Within An Airport concept.

> FROM PAGE 18

aviation practices. Malaysia Airlines has long embarked on green programmes such as integrating 3R (reduce, reuse and recycle) waste management practices, energy conservation, pursuing and obtaining ISO14001 certifications for environmental management systems, and increasing the use of biodegradable products.

The airline also invites passengers to participate in a carbon-offsetting scheme. The proceeds help fund

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selected United Nations-sanctioned programmes to protect rainforests in Malaysia, a natural carbon sink that reduces greenhouse gases and curbs the onset of climate change. Through a trust fund managed by the Forest Research Institute of Malaysia (FRIM) on behalf of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, projects satisfying the stipulated criteria are financed by these proceeds.

The world-class champion of environmentally-responsible aviation, however, has to be Malaysia Airports (*see sidebar*). Time and time again, Malaysia's flagship international gateway has won awards and accolades for its best practices and green operations. Its business partners are also active in eco-friendly practices.

South-East Asia's first dedicated airport-rail company, Express Rail Link, launched the thought-provoking "Go LoCO2" campaign in August

2009 to raise public awareness on reducing carbon emissions. Every year, Express Rail Link takes the equivalent of about 3.5 million cars off the road in terms of reduced carbon emissions.

CEO Noormah Mohd Noor says, "It is extremely satisfying when airport users from all over the world say that ERL has the quietest, cleanest and greenest trains they have ever ridden on."

From Iceland to India, and from Canada to Costa Rica, people in every corner of the world are becoming increasingly environmentally-aware. And in the aviation world, from airlines to airports and from pilots to passengers, Asia leads the way as air travel goes green!

7 steps

The KLIA commitment to environmental and social sustainability

integrates seven Green Principles into its operations and administration:

- Promoting replanting and environmental-friendly landscaping.

- Promoting recycling and reduction of landfill waste

- Reducing overall energy consumption.

- Reducing greenhouse-gas emissions and atmospheric pollution.

- Minimising water-consumption and wastage of fresh-water resources.

- Ensuring quality of water discharged into rivers.

- Monitoring of noise-levels in noise-sensitive areas within a radius of 20km around the airport.