

# Kicking the Habit: Air Travel in the Time of Climate Change

Air travel is neither just nor sustainable. So how can environmental justice activists make a global difference?

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Photo by [Anguskirk](#)

We live in a time of far-flung relationships, our families, colleagues, and friends often spread out across continents. These relationships mirror the global nature of many of our most pressing problems, such as global climate change—and they also contribute to those problems.

In *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough Planet*, Bill McKibben likens the biosphere to “a guy who smoked for forty years and then he had a stroke. He doesn’t smoke anymore, but the left side of his body doesn’t work either.” This new world, he says, requires new habits.

And, no doubt, many of us have adopted new habits—trying to use [public transportation](#), buying [local foods](#), [rejecting bottled water](#). But the “savings” from such practices are wiped out by a habit that many of us not only refuse to kick, but also increasingly embrace: flying, the single most ecologically costly act of individual consumption.

## Flights of Privilege

Only 2-3 percent of the world’s population flies internationally each year, but the climate impacts are felt by a much larger—and poorer—population.

A round-trip flight between New York and Los Angeles on a typical commercial jet yields an estimated 715 kilos of CO<sub>2</sub> per economy class passenger, according to the International Civil Aviation Organization. But due to the height at which planes fly, combined with the mixture of gases and particles they emit, conventional air travel has an impact on the global climate that’s approximately 2.7 times worse than its carbon emissions alone, says the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. As a result, that roundtrip flight’s “climatic forcing” is really 1,917 kilos, or almost two tons, of emissions—more than nine times the annual emissions of an average denizen of Haiti (as per U.S. Department of Energy figures).

Only 2-3 percent of the world’s population flies internationally on an annual basis, but the climate impacts of air travel are felt by a much larger—and poorer—population. It is difficult to illustrate the

meaning of such numbers in terms of who among the planet's citizens pays the costs.

But this is exactly what the 2009 German short film *The Bill* does in powerfully demonstrating the ecological privilege and disadvantage embodied by flying. In doing so, it shows aviation to be a classic example of how the comparatively well-off privatize benefits of environmental resource consumption (the ability to travel quickly and afar) while socializing the detriments. By making a disproportionate contribution to climate destabilization and associated forms of environmental degradation—biodiversity loss, rising sea levels, and desertification, for instance—air travelers exacerbate the precarious existence of the most vulnerable. In doing so, they contribute to unjust hierarchies (e.g. racism and imperialism) that reflect a world of profound inequality.

## **Global Organizing—Without Planes**

Clearly this presents a huge challenge to social and environmental justice advocates, activists, and organizers from the planet's relatively wealthy areas who often connect to distant peoples and places by flying. Because the institutions and individuals most responsible for our global predicaments typically exercise mobility and exert their power across great distances, those of us who want to challenge their practices often must also do so. So what to do?

One option is to use transportation that stays on the Earth's surface, to accept traveling more slowly, and to make flying a very rare exception instead of the rule. Throughout North America, buses—and, in many places, trains—are viable options. And for transoceanic voyages, ships (including freight ones) are a possibility—albeit not typically inexpensive or as common as they need be.



[Finding Rootedness](#)

In an increasingly vulnerable world, we're searching for rooted communities—and what we can learn from them.

Another option—indeed an obligation in a time of growing ecological destruction and a degraded resource base—is to stay home more often. Given that “jet travel can't be our salvation in an age of climate shock and dwindling oil,” McKibben writes, “the kind of trip you can take with a click of a mouse will have to substitute.” In other words, we have to become much better at exploiting the “trips” that the Internet and related technologies afford—by videoconferencing, for example.

While such options present numerous challenges, not least logistical ones, perhaps the biggest obstacle is the particular way of seeing and being common to the small slice of the world's population that flies regularly. Traveling long distances by bus, train, or ship, for example, necessitates time—and a willingness to expend it in manners that those from the world's privileged parts and sectors are not used to doing. It doesn't necessarily entail doing less, but it does mean doing things in different ways.

## **A New Normal**

It also calls for new mechanisms and institutions—and some organizing to bring them about. Take long-distance travel by ship. Less than a century ago, many regular folks traversed the seas—think of

immigrants to Angel and Ellis islands. And many well-known organizers and activists—Gandhi, Helen Keller, and W.E.B. Dubois, to name just three—journeyed extensively by ship.

To do so today, of course, is far more difficult as jet travel has greatly weakened the passenger ship option. But what if, for instance, U.S. and Canadian activists and advocates going to Denmark for the Dec. 2009 climate summit had, instead of booking individual flights, organized to travel together by ship—with all promising to get to and from their ports of call by surface-level transportation? And what if they had publicized this effort as a way of setting an example for, and challenging, others?

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That such a suggestion will seem unrealistic, if not foolhardy, to many illustrates the way that what we're used to thinking of as normal can stifle our imaginations, and let us off the political, ecological, and ethical hook. The option is as "realistic" as we make it. In this regard, we need to push and support one another in the effort to make far-reaching alternatives viable.

Climate science tells us that we need a 90 percent cut in greenhouse gas emissions over the next few decades to keep within a safe upper limit of atmospheric carbon. In light of the great changes such a reduction demands, what is unrealistic and foolhardy is the notion that we can continue flying with abandon.



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