



Tourism and Climate Policy: August 2021

The stark warning provided by this week's IPCC [report](#) and its accompanying [press release](#) continues to be amplified by extreme conditions. In Greece, Germany and other parts of Europe exceptional heat and floods have caused misery. Predictions have been overtaken by reality: the recent heat dome in North America exceeded worst-case modelling. The report was met with messages of support from across the scientific community.

This report should send a shiver down the spine of everyone who reads it. It sets out where we are now and where we are headed: in a hole, and still digging.¹

Following the EU's [Climate Law](#) and other national goal-setting, political positioning continues ahead of COP26: it is increasingly likely that policy will become more coercive to achieve the emissions reductions necessary. Whether it is the development of LEZ cities (only [Euro6 coaches will be allowed in Amsterdam from January 2022](#)) or global accords, change to the business environment for travel and tourism as a consequence of climate policy will accelerate.

Reducing emissions at the rate required to reduce the risk of uncontrollable climate change means less fossil-fuelled activity, and very soon. How can we reconcile that with an industry based on encouraging discretionary travel?

All about aviation?

The biggest factor in tourism's emissions is the distance travelled by fossil-fuelled transport. As an industry in part dependent on inter-continental travel for which there is no economically viable alternative, high-quality carbon offsetting may be desirable, even necessary, but it is not sufficient. Low-quality carbon offsetting makes things worse.

If aviation growth continued at pre-pandemic trends, models suggest that by mid-century the emissions from fossil-fuelled flights alone would exceed the annual carbon budget. It seems increasingly likely that measures to curb carbon-based aviation will be proposed, through any combination of price, including impact of tax, and capacity management.

[Zero carbon aviation](#) is still some way off, especially for intercontinental travel, so what contribution can the long-haul sector make to 2030 emissions reduction goals only nine years distant? Supply chain management and back-office reductions will help, but what about consumers: is there a business case for encouraging longer holidays taken less often? Will typical holiday allowances evolve to support that?

¹ Professor Dave Reay, Director of Edinburgh Climate Change Institute, University of Edinburgh, in response to IPCC report. Source: <https://www.sciencemediacentre.org/expert-reaction-to-the-ipccs-working-group-i-contribution-to-the-sixth-assessment-report/> (accessed 12th August 2021).

Low-no carbon travel options exist. Intra-Europe, rail infrastructure and product are changing, and modern coaches provide a very low emission per passenger. City transport systems are going green. Offering provably lower-carbon alternatives is a fast-growing commercial opportunity. Some destinations are looking at the overall desirability of visitors in terms of climate impact an in-destination activity and are devising strategy accordingly. They are also looking hard at their own supply-chain emissions. How will source markets respond?

For many companies still under extreme financial stress, sustainability has struggled to compete with short-term survival among management priorities, but the next 6-12 month is likely to see a big shift towards medium-long term planning. Managing down emissions makes economic sense: lower bills and growing client demand just two reasons action on climate, including product development with carbon footprint in mind. But strategic investment is needed to support system change, and that requires political will and action.

Politics get personal

Tourism is driven by discretionary spend by consumers, not corporates. And there is a paradox when we consider climate action through a personal perspective. A consumer might be aggrieved if she has made great efforts to reduce her carbon footprint through home heating, day-to-day travel and consumption, yet finds foreign travel priced out of reach due to climate policy increasing the cost of flying. But cross-border travel, let alone long-haul aviation, is still out of reach of most of the world's population: who says what's fair?

There is a complex political calculation to make, balancing socio-economic contribution with adverse climate impact, and devising a regulatory and fiscal environment that can be implemented without widespread opposition. Compromise will be necessary to make progress. Public consent is a factor: while the *gilets jaunes* protests in France were driven by more than proposed fuel cost increases, there is no doubt those were a factor. But there is a difference between a government mandated increase in day-to-day expenses and flights costing more.

The question of popular support for 'anti aviation' policy is open. France's [citizens assembly on climate](#) wanted policy makers to go further than they did in current climate law proposals. It was reported in [Le Monde Diplomatique](#) this month that the climate bill has been watered down following resistance from the advertising industry, and the *Conseil d'Etat* concluded that the measures remaining are insufficient to meet France's 40% reduction targets.

Balancing interests is complex: long-haul visitors typically spend more, but their flights account for greater emissions, and there isn't yet a viable low-carbon alternative for intercontinental aviation. Every industry will argue its corner, and tourism is no exception. Done well, it can deliver sustained socio-economic benefit that is geographically and seasonally spread. It employs a wide range of people engaged in activity that maintains the natural and cultural diversity that makes life more enjoyable and travel worthwhile. Travel is now also much more thought-provoking: for individuals, destinations, and businesses alike.

To be a credible contributor in devising policy that will retain a sustainable space in which tourism will thrive, industry (and its representatives) needs to show it can manage down emissions. ETOA is here to argue for good policy and to share and support good practice.