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PLANTING TREES FOR THE CLIMATE: PURE GREENWASHING OR A REAL OPPORTUNITY FOR SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL?



©Roman Dachsel

When it comes to climate protection, planting trees is one of the most popular measures in the travel market. We often encounter promises such as “CO₂-neutral flights”, “a planted tree instead of room cleaning”, “net zero travel” and even “climate-positive holidays”. But just how sustainable is planting trees as a climate protection measure really?

At Green Pearls®, we have over a decade of experience supporting sustainable accommodation providers with their communications, so we encounter this topic repeatedly. We are critical of the idea of offsetting CO₂ emissions simply by planting trees. After all, ‘planting trees’ can easily amount to greenwashing and is often used for this very purpose. “For every product

purchased, we plant a tree" – who hasn't heard this advertising slogan? At the same time, however, there are also meaningful forest and reforestation projects that make a real contribution to climate protection without serving as a compensation measure. As a traveller, you can support these projects with complete confidence.

BUT WHY PLANT TREES TO OFFSET EMISSIONS IN THE FIRST PLACE?



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Climate protection is now an issue in all areas of our lives — and almost every activity results in CO₂ emissions. **Flying**, in particular, generates several tons of greenhouse gases per person on a single long-haul flight, and these emissions are even more harmful to the climate when released at high altitudes. From **winter 2025/26** onwards, passengers will be able to see these emissions for the first time thanks to the new [Flight Emissions Label \(FEL\) from the European Commission](https://germany.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/neues-label-informiert-ab-sommer-2025-uber-treibhausgas-emissionen-von-flugen-2024-12-18_de) (https://germany.representation.ec.europa.eu/news/neues-label-informiert-ab-sommer-2025-uber-treibhausgas-emissionen-von-flugen-2024-12-18_de). The aim is to make the climate impact of flights more transparent, even though participation by airlines is currently voluntary (which unfortunately demonstrates the power of the lobby in this area once again).

But what can you do if your trip causes a large amount of CO₂ emissions? Tree planting campaigns offer one solution: by absorbing CO₂ and releasing oxygen, trees are meant to offset the negative effects of travel. This sounds logical, but it only works on paper. In reality, this nice calculation only works to a limited extent.

THE PROBLEMS WITH PLANTING TREES TO OFFSET EMISSIONS:

#1 THE CALCULATIONS

The explanation often given for why tree-planting projects are useful for offsetting emissions is as follows: "A tree absorbs X kilograms of CO₂." However, such calculations only apply to mature trees (for example, [a 35-metre-high spruce stores around 2.6 tonnes of CO₂ during its 100-year life cycle](https://www.wald.de/waldwissen/wie-viel-kohlendioxid-co2-speichert-der-wald-bzw-ein-baum/#:~:text=Wie%20wird%20CO2%20im%20Baum,Form%20im%20Baum%20gespeichert%20) (<https://www.wald.de/waldwissen/wie-viel-kohlendioxid-co2-speichert-der-wald-bzw-ein-baum/#:~:text=Wie%20wird%20CO2%20im%20Baum,Form%20im%20Baum%20gespeichert%20>)). However, compensation projects usually involve planting seedlings that take decades to reach a stage where they can store significant amounts of CO₂.

#2 LACK OF CARE

Time and again, it has been shown that compensation planting campaigns result in a seedling being placed in the ground and then left to fend for itself. Without proper care, the saplings dry up, get eaten by animals, or die. Therefore, there is no guarantee that a seedling will grow into a tree.



It takes a banyan tree in Bali several hundred years to grow. ©Umike_foto | Stock.Adobe.com

#3 INDIVIDUAL TREES INSTEAD OF ECOSYSTEMS

Another [study](https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/70/11/947/5903754?utm_source=chatgpt.com&login=false) (https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/70/11/947/5903754?utm_source=chatgpt.com&login=false) shows that, in theory, such maintenance would be unnecessary. However, this works only if we protect functioning ecosystems instead of creating monoculture plantations. The study shows that protecting existing forests is significantly more beneficial for the climate and nature, and it is also more cost-effective.

#4 ARE THEY REALLY ABSORBING ADDITIONAL CO₂?

However, when it comes to protecting existing forest projects, climate partners describe the difficulty of guaranteeing that the protection will bind ADDITIONAL emissions caused by travel. In other words, the forest already exists, but those who want to offset emissions demand a NEW positive effect on the climate.

#5 FOREST FIRES



All bound CO₂ is released again in a forest fire. BILD: Pixabay

Climate change worsens the risk: wildfires increasingly threaten forests. When fires break out, they release CO₂ (<https://www.br.de/nachrichten/bayern/lebende-co2-speicher-baeume-sind-mehr-als-brennholz,TdkdmQH>) that took years to store. As a result, reforestation efforts to protect the climate can be quickly undone.

#5 WRONG TREE SPECIES, WRONG AREAS

In 2024, *The Guardian* (<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2024/feb/15/ill-judged-tree-planting-africa-threatens-ecosystems-scientists-warn>) revealed that reforestation projects had targeted African savannas, even though forests do not naturally grow there. Scientists warn that this will destroy valuable ecosystems and endanger biodiversity. Similarly, ecologists criticize eucalyptus farms in Brazil because eucalyptus is not a native species there.

#6 DISPLACEMENT OF PEOPLE

Displacement for supposedly sustainable projects is particularly problematic. In Uganda, for instance, a whole region lost its land to a forestry company (<https://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin-articles/the-new-forests-company-in-uganda-villages-evicted-deceived-and-dumped-into-poverty>) that advertised “climate protection through reforestation.” Around 10,000 people were forcibly displaced.

“In my experience, tree planting often borders on greenwashing. I think social projects that directly help people are better.” —Stefany Seipp, Managing Director of Green Pearls @ Unique Places

IS PLANTING TREES FOR CLIMATE PURPOSES A BAD THING?

No, you can't say that across the board. Trees are essential for our planet, and therefore, for our survival. **However**, many tree-planting campaigns serve marketing purposes rather than the climate, and, in the worst case, they can even cause more harm than good. A commentary on *The Conversation* (<https://theconversation.com/greenwashing-corporate-tree-planting-generates-goodwill-but-may-sometimes-harm-the-planet-103457>) sums it up as follows: “Corporate tree planting primarily creates a positive image, but it can actually harm the planet and local communities if it is done without considering existing conditions.”

HOW CAN WE IDENTIFY GREENWASHING IN THE CONTEXT OF “PLANTING TREES FOR THE CLIMATE”?

As a consumer, you have more power than you might realize. CO₂ compensation offers exist because there is demand for them. This makes it all the more important to take a close look:

- **Ask questions:** Where are the trees being planted? What types of trees? Who is responsible for their care?
- **Demand transparency:** Reputable projects openly answer these questions, often without you having to ask, e.g., on their website. Greenwashing campaigns usually fall silent quickly.
- **Think holistically:** Don't just consider “one tree per night,” but also everything else involved. Does your chosen accommodation promote sustainability in other ways? Is the tree-planting campaign part of a comprehensive strategy, or is it the only measure? We prefer projects that focus on climate, people, and biodiversity simultaneously. A well-thought-out tree planting measure can certainly fit the bill!

Travel blogger Julia Lassner ([Globusliebe](https://globusliebe.com/baeume-pflanzen-greenwashing/) (<https://globusliebe.com/baeume-pflanzen-greenwashing/>)) sums it up perfectly:



“I always ask where the trees will be planted and if they will be cared for properly. Most of the time, I don't receive an answer, and suddenly, there's no more interest in working together. This quickly shows me which companies are being honest and which are just greenwashing.” — Julia from Globusliebe

©ZHENYA SWAN PHOTOGRAPHY | Inkaterra
Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel

HOW SUSTAINABLE HOTELS APPROACH THE TOPIC OF “PLANTING TREES”

CO₂ offsetting is a major issue for our Green Pearls® accommodations. There is one point on which all agree: **prevention is better than compensation.**

AVOIDING CO₂ INSTEAD OF SUGARCOATING IT

Alessa Konrad, from the **Naturhotel Outside** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/hotel-outside1/>) in East Tyrol, is often contacted by companies looking to sell CO₂ offset projects. Her response is always the same:

„As an environmentally certified nature hotel, we are committed to sustainability and resource conservation, but our approach goes beyond planting trees. We implement measures directly in the hotel and share them with our guests. These measures include free pick-up from the train station for guests arriving by public transportation, regional shopping, eliminating disposable products such as bath slippers, using energy-efficient technologies in the wellness area, and maximizing our PV system.“

The approach is clear: first and foremost, emissions should be avoided where they arise. This applies not only to hotels but also to travelers themselves. For example, it is better to travel by train than by plane, to rent a suitcase than to buy a new one, and to stay in a sustainable hotel than in a hotel from an international chain.

Marion Muller from the North German hotel association **SANDcollection** says that they are always mindful of the companies they support at their sustainable Lifestylehotels, **SANDnature** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/sand-lifestylehotel/>), and **SANDglow**. These include **MyBoo bamboo bicycles** for rent, **Samova tea** for breakfast, and climate-neutral, recycled toilet paper from **Green Hygiene**. Incidentally, the latter's “climate neutrality” is achieved through solar energy, both its own and that promoted by Climate Partner, rather than through trees.

SUCCESSFUL FOREST PROJECTS—WHEN THEY ARE PROPERLY PLANNED AND EXECUTED

However, criticism of “planting trees for the climate” does not mean a complete rejection of the idea. In fact, some Green Pearls® hotels have launched impressive projects that promote biodiversity and strengthen ecosystems.



Fog is typical of Machu Picchu, and Inkaterra has helped reforest the surrounding area. © ZHENYA SWAN PHOTOGRAPHY

PRIMORDIAL CLOUD FOREST IN THE PERUVIAN ANDES

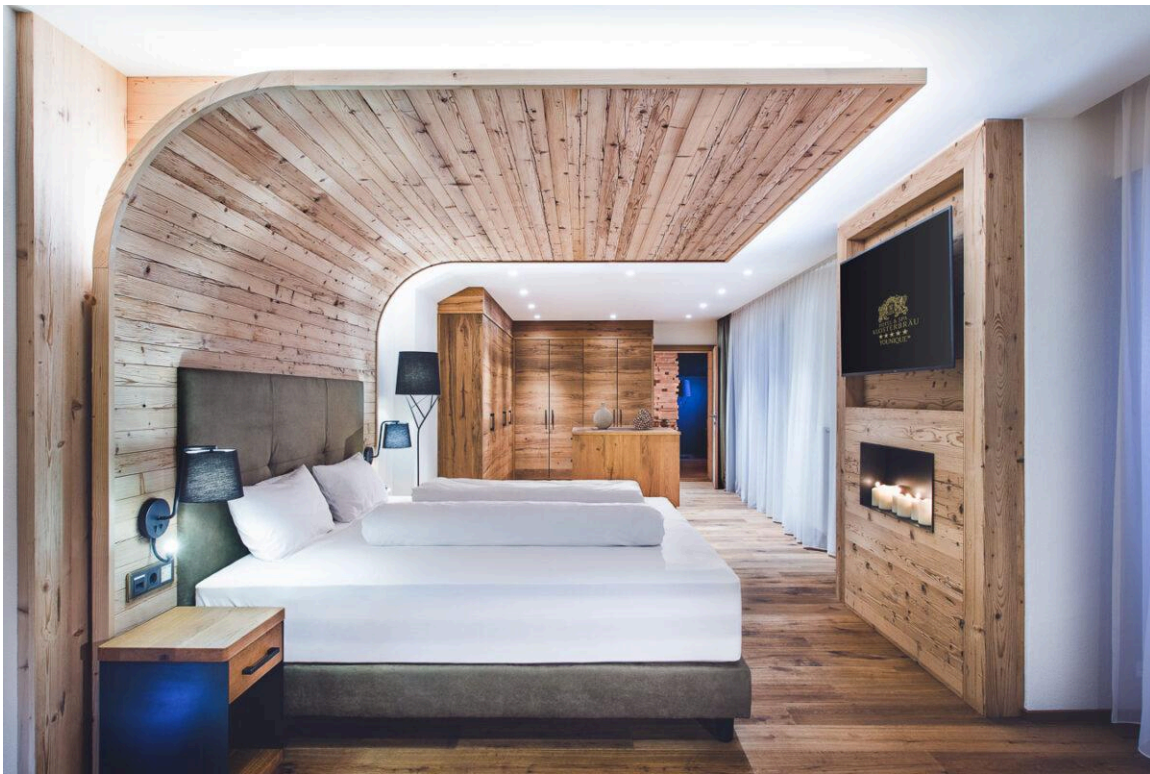
One of the **Inkaterra Machu Picchu Pueblo Hotel's** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/inkaterra-machu-picchu-pueblo-hotel/>) signature projects is its cloud forest initiative. When the hotel's founder, José Koechlin, acquired the property in the 1980s, the former cloud forest had already been cleared and converted into agricultural land. Rather than accepting this, Koechlin began gradually restoring the original forest around the hotel.

Today, around 30 years later, guests can witness the results of this pioneering work firsthand: orchids, butterflies, and rare bird species such as the Andean cock-of-the-rock. Additional initiatives, such as comprehensive waste management and river cleanups, contributed to Machu Picchu's designation as the world's first climate-neutral wonder in 2017.

What makes it special: The focus has always been on a genuine, long-term commitment to nature and biodiversity, not quick CO2 compensation.

PLANTING A FORESTS RIGHT OUTSIDE ONE'S DOORSTEP

Many European hotels are also focusing on reforestation and forest protection—directly at their own accommodations. However, this is not necessarily a compensation measure; rather, it is hands-on nature conservation:



Hotel rooms with wood from the hotel's own forest—wood used to make furniture continues to store CO₂. ©David Johannsen | Hotel Klosterbräu

- **GUT SONNENHAUSEN ([HTTPS://WWW.GREENPEARLS.COM/HOTELS/GUT-SONNENHAUSEN/](https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/gut-sonnenhausen/)), BAVARIA**

Several years ago, the hotel planted around **400 trees** and over **10,000 shrubs** along its mountain trail. Today, guests, employees, and wildlife alike enjoy the increased diversity of flora.

- **NATURRESORT GERBEHOF ([HTTPS://WWW.GREENPEARLS.COM/HOTELS/NATURRESORT-GERBEHOF-LAKE-CONSTANCE/](https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/naturresort-gerbehof-lake-constance/)), LAKE CONSTANCE**

The organic hotel near Friedrichshafen is surrounded by its own forest. The hotel uses the wood for its own furniture, among other things, while dead wood and wood infested with beetles are used to generate energy. There is also a forest rest area for wild animals. Hostess **Ursula Wagner** criticizes the practice of using trees purely for CO₂ compensation: "There's a lot of greenwashing in this area."

- **OLM NATURE ESCAPE ([HTTPS://WWW.OLM.IT/EN/](https://www.olm.it/en/)), SOUTH TIROL**

Rather than planting trees elsewhere, OLM has created its own **wild garden with biotope plants**, including old regional fruit tree species. "For us, real climate protection is about quality, not quantity. We take responsibility locally instead of relying on distant projects," says **Astrid Hellweger**, the host.

- **MY ARBOR ([HTTPS://WWW.GREENPEARLS.COM/HOTELS/MY-ARBOR/](https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/my-arbor/)), SOUTH TIROL**

As a "tree hotel," My Arbor is a sustainable wellness hotel closely connected to the forest. New trees, such as spruce, Swiss stone pine, fir, and larch, are regularly planted around the hotel. This process binds CO₂ and strengthens biodiversity, preserving the forest. Spruce trees are also part of the ecosystem. Host **Alexandra Huber** explains, "The problem is that spruce trees are susceptible to bark beetles, which sometimes destroy entire slopes. That's exactly why we're trying to replant them."

- **HOTEL KLOSTERBRÄU ([HTTPS://WWW.GREENPEARLS.COM/HOTELS/HOTEL-KLOSTERBRAEU/](https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/hotel-klosterbraeu/)), TIROL**

In addition to its own forest, which provides wood for the [nature rooms](https://www.klosterbraeu.com/en/wellness-hotel-tyrol/blog/check-out-our-new-nature-rooms) (<https://www.klosterbraeu.com/en/wellness-hotel-tyrol/blog/check-out-our-new-nature-rooms>), for example, the hotel launched a new project in 2025. Together with guests, **300 apple trees** were planted on the parish hill. Once the fruit is ready, it will be used in the hotel for everything from apple strudel to animal feed for the hotel's petting zoo.



The microforest at Hotel Luise — shortly after planting and as it looks today. ©Hotel Luise / Kollage If

The **Hotel Luise** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/hotel-luise/>) in Erlangen proves that forest projects can be established in urban areas as well. A microforest with over 200 trees was created there, designed according to ecological principles with varying plant heights that function together like a real forest.

Laura Heufelder from the hotel explains:

“Our microforest improves the microclimate and has become a paradise for birds, insects, and small animals. However, our primary goal is to produce zero CO2. We only offset unavoidable CO2 as a last resort. This approach benefits the environment and the economy, as it creates jobs.”

PROTECT AND ENJOY YOUR OWN FOREST

Not all sustainable hotels plant new trees—some protect the surrounding forest and allow guests to experience it in a unique way.

PARADISO PURE.LIVING VEGAN HOTEL , SOUTH TYROL



Are you visiting the Dolomites by car? To protect the forest, you need a special permit to do so. ©Paradiso Pure.Living Vegan Hotel

The **Paradiso Pure.Living Vegan Hotel** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/paradiso-pure-living/>) is located at an altitude of over 2,000 meters in the heart of the Schlern-Rosengarten Nature Park, which is protected by UNESCO, on the Seiser Alm. In this sensitive environment, nature conservation is paramount. To minimize traffic pollution, guests are only allowed to drive their cars on arrival and departure days. During their stay, cars must remain in the parking lot.

The hotel provides a special transit permit for this purpose, which park rangers check. This ensures that the alpine nature is preserved for future generations to enjoy.

HOTEL KLOSTERHOF – ALPINE HIDEAWAY & SPA, BAVARIA

The adjacent forest is also a focal point at the **Klosterhof – Alpine Hideaway & Spa** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/klosterhof-alpine-hideaway-spa/>) in Bayerisch Gmain. Guests can experience it through mindful forest bathing (<https://green-travel-blog.com/mindfulness-while-traveling-about-forest-bathing-and-relaxation-in-nature/>), which promotes relaxation and a new awareness of nature. The experience is enhanced by a herb garden and a “green wall” at the buffet where guests can harvest fresh herbs.

The goal is not to offset CO₂, but to bring nature to life, appreciate its resources, and bring a piece of nature into guests' everyday lives.

CLIMATE-NEUTRAL OVERNIGHT STAYS WITH CO₂ COMPENSATION



©SCHWARZWALD PANORAMA

A special case in our network is the **SCHWARZWALD PANORAMA** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/schwarzwald-panorama/>) in Bad Herrenalb. Stephan Bode's establishment is considered a pioneer in sustainable hospitality. Its gold organic certification, zero-waste breakfast buffet, and hotel rooms made from 100% recyclable materials ("circular living") set new standards.

However, not all emissions can be avoided here either. To offer "[climate-neutral overnight stays](https://www.schwarzwald-panorama.com/hotel-black-forest/carbon-neutral-stay-co2-calculator/)" and "[climate-neutral conferences](https://www.schwarzwald-panorama.com/campus-conference/green-meetings/)," the hotel works with **ClimatePartner**. The principle remains clear: reduce before compensating. However, unavoidable emissions are transparently offset – among other things, through **two forest projects** that are part of a larger portfolio of 20 recognized climate protection initiatives.

SCHWARZWALD PANORAMA has reduced, removed, or avoided 5,710 tons of CO₂ and collected 6,010 kilograms of plastic. Additionally, 112 trees were planted in 2023 and 2025, both in Germany and internationally, as part of a comprehensive climate protection initiative.

FAQS AND TIPS: OFFSETTING EMISSIONS CAUSED BY TRAVEL THROUGH TREE PLANTING

IS PLANTING TREES AN EFFECTIVE WAY TO OFFSET CO₂ EMISSIONS?

Yes and no. It only makes sense if it is well thought out, appropriate for the location, and designed for the long term. Many projects fail due to a lack of maintenance or because they serve marketing purposes more than climate protection purposes. To really make a difference, you should primarily avoid emissions and offset unavoidable emissions through recognized climate protection projects (not necessarily tree planting).

HOW CAN I SPOT GREENWASHING?

Be skeptical of promises such as "one tree for every tube of toothpaste sold." Ask questions: Where are the trees planted? Who takes care of them? Reputable companies answer these questions transparently, while greenwashers tend not to.

HOW CAN I GET INVOLVED?

- **Ask questions:** Feel free to email companies that advertise tree-planting campaigns.
- **Plant locally:** Plant trees in your own neighborhood so that you can take care of them yourself or at least see the results.

- **Consume mindfully:** As **Ursula Wagner from Naturresort Gerbehof** emphasizes, "Everyone should pay attention to the environment and nature in their daily lives. Does the light always have to be on? Do I need products like avocados, which require huge amounts of water?" Being mindful in everyday life often saves more CO₂ than symbolic planting campaigns.
- **Think creatively:** Fabienne Anhamatten from the **Hotel Bella Vista in Zermatt** (<https://www.greenpearls.com/hotels/hotel-bella-vista-zermatt/>) provides a good example. She didn't dispose of her Christmas tree, but rather planted it in the spring, allowing it to remain part of the cycle.

In conclusion, we would like to emphasize that genuine climate protection while traveling begins with making many small, mindful decisions along the way, not with planting a tree.



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