

AReCO in the News

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By Murray May

'Is your trip necessary?'

During World War II, petrol for civilian use was tightly rationed. People were urged to make more efficient use of their cars and to double up whenever possible. At the same time, prominent posters urged everyone to ask the most important question: 'Is your trip necessary?'" Now that a paralysing collision between the growth of aviation and concerns about the global and local environments is becoming more apparent, it is timely to once again ask the question.

The incentives and encouragements to travel— especially overseas air travel—arrive regularly in my mailbox. My credit card points scheme encourages me to take rewards by flying to London or Paris, touring the UK and Ireland, or 'taking the kids to Disneyland.' 'The world is your oyster,' I'm told. Likewise the motoring organisation I'm a member of has an active promotion scheme for travelling the world, for example by touring Europe or Canada and Alaska. Additional options appear in the Odyssey Ed-Ventures catalogue, with its associated educational opportunities. It offers me 14 nights in Egypt or 24 nights in China, including the Yangtze Gorge and the Great Wall of China.

Things have certainly changed from the days of Thomas Cook. In the developed world, international travel over long distances has become less exceptional, more mundane and even routine. People travel in some cases to sustain family ties and other personal relationships at a distance (hence George Monbiot's reference in his 2006 book *Heat* to 'love miles'). In other cases, regular international travel for holidays is an assumed part of the annual routine of family life.

International travel is also often an increasingly prescribed and extended part of one's education and working life, or used for attending sports or other leisure activities. The sheer weight of advertising underlines the fact that long-distance air travel has become embedded in the lives of individuals, households and organisations.

Sustainable transport academic Professor John Whitelegg observes that distance has been transformed into a commodity that is consumed at an increasing rate, using large amounts of energy and large amounts of public expenditure. Another important element is the growing number of tourists. The driving force behind global tourism and air travel is primarily the global economic system—indeed increased economic globalisation assumes increasingly mobile societies. In contrast with 697 million international tourist arrivals (i.e. arrivals from abroad) in 2000, the World Tourism Organization expects the number of arrivals to reach one billion by 2010 and 1.6 billion by 2020.

Although a number of community and environmental organisations have highlighted the ecological implications of this growth, perhaps more surprising is the role taken on this issue by two official bodies in the UK, namely the Sustainable Development Commission and the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution. The Royal Commission, for example, has consistently flagged that 'emissions from aircraft are likely to be a major contributor to global warming if the present increase in air traffic continues unabated.' In a special report entitled *The Environmental Effects of Civil Aircraft in Flight*, it expresses deep concern about the global impacts of the rapid growth in air travel.

One estimate by the commission suggests that if air travel expansion in the UK goes unchecked, aviation will be costing about a quarter of the UK's climate change budget by 2020, and by 2050 this could have risen to over half or even three quarters of the budget. (The calculations assume that the rest of the economy moves along the commonly quoted pathway towards a 60 per cent reduction in emissions by 2050. They also use the three times factor for enhanced radiative forcing that applies to aviation emissions at altitude.)

A typical adaptive approach is to improve aircraft efficiency. For example, Boeing's new 787 will burn 20 per cent less fuel than the 767 it will replace. The promotion of the large Airbus A380 is also linked to its lower fuel consumption characteristics.

However, the efficiency improvements both per aeroplane and per passenger kilometre are small when compared with the effects of the expected growth. More and more people travelling by air basically means more airport capacity, more flights, and more pollution.

Air travel is typically forecast by the aviation industry to grow at 4 to 5 per cent a year for the next 10 to 15 years. In areas such as the Asia-Pacific, growth rates of 7 per cent a year are tipped until the 2020s. Canberra Airport celebrated a 6 per cent increase in passenger movements in a year with an item entitled "Passenger numbers soar" in the February 2006 issue of its newsletter *The Hub*. Sydney Airport's master plan predicts a near trebling of passenger numbers (to 68.3 million) between 2003 and 2023. Aircraft manufacturers like Boeing and Airbus are planning for significant growth in air travel, with plans to sell substantial numbers of aircraft to China, for example.

The juxtaposition of such planned growth with increasingly dire reports about climate change is nonsensical. In essence, the growth-oriented visions for aviation held by the aviation and tourism industries run directly counter to the deep cuts in greenhouse gas emissions that are required to address global warming. Does the aviation industry think it is excluded from the need for deep cuts in emissions? As Prof. Ian Lowe says in his book *Living in the Hothouse* (p. 202): 'Now that we have reached the point of perturbing the global climate, it is a dangerous illusion to think that our impacts can be expanded still further with impunity.'

Jack Saporito, part of an alliance of residents concerning Chicago O'Hare Airport in the USA (<http://www.areco.org/>), suggests that many activists are fighting the wrong battles. The major problem is growth—not noise or emissions, because noise, emissions etc. grow proportionally with the growth in flight numbers.

Governments typically view tourism as a way of boosting the economy and therefore ignore its environmental and greenhouse impacts. Given that a broader ecological framework in relation to tourism is only just emerging, it is thus not surprising that the environmental ramifications of tourist travel, and air travel in particular, have been neglected. Recent work suggests that air travel for tourism has a very significant environmental impact, particularly with international and long-distance flights.

The task of reframing tourism presents a significant challenge. Not only does it challenge the assumptions underlying economic globalisation. Two generations of OECD citizens have become accustomed to relatively inexpensive long-haul travel, with leisure travel accounting for up to 80 per cent of air travel. Environmental considerations generally rank low in consumer criteria for choosing a holiday destination and the means for getting there, and tourism marketing rarely seeks to provide information on the environmental impacts stemming from air travel.

George Monbiot in his book *Heat* highlights the contradiction between intention and action when it comes to flying. When challenging his friends about their planned weekend in Rome or their holiday in Florida, he comments: "They respond with a strange, distant smile and avert their eyes. They just want to enjoy themselves. Who am I to spoil their fun? The moral dissonance is deafening" (*The Guardian*, 28 February, 2006).

The growth of aviation worldwide is very much part of global consumer capitalism, which is high-growth, high-energy, and ecologically unsustainable. A huge reduction in international air travel is essential. The British royal commission outlines a range of policy actions that can be used to moderate and reduce demand. Clive Hamilton of the Australia Institute emphasises that a radical transformation of ourselves is also needed.

A few years ago writer Robert Dessaix wrote an article called *Wanderlust*, in which he suggested that the 'quest for salvation' and 'knowledge of the world' have been the driving forces behind travel for millennia (*The Australian*, 9 February, 2000, Review of Books, pages 9-10). However, Dessaix suggests the modern versions have often become trivialised. The current and projected high-energy and high numbers model for global air travel adds in significant ethical dimensions as discussed so well by Monbiot. He concludes: 'It has become plain to me that long-distance travel, high speed and the curtailment of climate change are not compatible' (*Heat*, p. 188). Hence the question: Is your trip necessary?