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## The flying less movement

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Chapô

Compared to the cacophony of disparate voices praising the virtues of driving less, cycling and walking, calls for rethinking our flying habits have until recently been few and far between. Yet the number of advocates of 'flying less' has been steadily growing for more than a decade. As their voices begin to echo further afield, they have turned what was until recently a rather niche debate into a movement reshaping the way we think of air travel. Who are these people and what is their message?

Présentation longue

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The flying less movement has been energised by citizens making a consistent effort to achieve a low-carbon footprint not just at home through, for example, recycling, using more energy-efficient appliances, or driving less, but also in activities away from home that have often involved flying such as holidaymaking and work-related conferences and meetings. Although the size of the movement is not known, it involves a growing number of people from many different professional backgrounds in every continent. Some of its most visible advocates are environmentalist Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Towns movement, Swedish sports commentator and gold medal Olympian Bjorn Ferry, Swedish opera singer Malena Ernman and her daughter Greta Thunberg, Maja Rosén and Lotta Hammar, founders of We Stay Grounded, and climate scientists such as Alice Larkin and Kevin Anderson in the UK, Peter Kalmus and Katharine Hayhoe in USA.

Key strands of their message, as articulated by some of its most visible figures, can be succinctly outlined in the following points: <br></br>

## **Climate change is an urgent issue**

We tend to think of climate change as a problem that can be addressed with incremental changes in technology and behaviour aiming at lower energy consumption in a more or less distant future. Yet, what matters are not levels of technological efficiency in say 2080 but cumulative greenhouse emissions which could trigger a tipping point in climate dynamics. This means that we have a limited 'carbon budget' that must be adhered to if average global temperatures are to stay below what has been agreed as being a safe threshold<sup>1</sup>. The size of this budget depends on the probability of exceeding the 1.5 or 2 degrees threshold between acceptable and dangerous climate change<sup>2</sup>. To meet the commitment of the Paris Agreement of keeping temperatures 'well below 2 degrees' (and aiming towards 1.5 degrees) we have a carbon budget of 655 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> (from 2020), and at the current rate of emissions this budget will be consumed within 18 years. If rich countries are to honour the principle of equity enshrined in the Paris Agreement and make a greater mitigation effort, they have to cut carbon emissions by more than 10% per year<sup>3</sup>. The problem is that adapting everyday technologies to new energy systems can take decades, and therefore there is no alternative but to reduce energy demand<sup>4</sup>. This means changes in lifestyles<sup>5</sup>, and for those who have normalised high-carbon lifestyles this means flying less or not flying at all<sup>6</sup>. <br></br>

## **Climate change is about equity**

The notion of carbon budgets reframes climate change as a zero-sum game. The more carbon is emitted by some, the less can be emitted by others. Discussions about the responsibility for reducing emissions have tended to focus on emissions by countries. Turning their focus to individuals, recent reports by Oxfam<sup>7</sup> and the French economists Lucas Chancel and Thomas Piketty have shown that the richest 10% of the global population is responsible for 50% of carbon emissions<sup>8</sup>. Climate scientist Kevin Anderson has estimated that if this privileged group were to reduce its emissions to those of the average European citizen, global carbon emissions would be reduced by 33%, within one or two years<sup>9</sup>. Poor people who will be most affected by climate change are those who emit less carbon and whose well-being could be

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## **Flying is artificially cheap**

Worldwide more than 420 new airports, 121 new runways, 205 runway extensions, 262 new terminals and 175 terminal extensions are currently being planned or under construction<sup>[13]</sup>. The aviation industry expects the number of passengers to double to 8.2 billion in 2037<sup>[14]</sup>. But this growth is being aided by low-tax or tax-free fuels<sup>[15]</sup> and a lack of regulation regarding carbon emissions – aviation has repeatedly been left outside international climate negotiations such as COP21 and current plans to offset aviation emissions after 2020 have fundamental flaws<sup>[16]</sup>. The current system of mass air travel relies on a number of policies and those policies can be changed<sup>[17]</sup>. The expansion of aviation is not inevitable. <br></br>

## **Beware of techno-optimism...**

Despite claims by the aviation industry such rapid growth is not 'green'<sup>[18]</sup>. There is no such thing as sustainable aviation. Innovation in fuel efficiency and less polluting fuels are not enough to make aviation a clean mode of transport, especially considering the current and expected rapid growth in demand<sup>[19]</sup>. Norway's airport operator has noted that electric planes will be available by 2050 to operate short-haul

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## **Individual versus collective action is a false dichotomy**

Reducing emissions urgently requires decisive action by governments and big business to put in place regulations and infrastructures that enable individuals to change their habits. However, the argument that a focus on individual action diverts attention from systemic change is premised on a false dichotomy. Individual action does matter because it is a catalyst for collective action. Four interrelated issues to consider: <br></br>

### **a) Never underestimate the power of small, peaceful minorities**

Most probably only a small part of the population will willingly fly less or stop flying. But small minorities can be powerful minorities and their gestures matter, especially when, as is often the case with frequent flyers, these people occupy influential positions and their voices can be heard more loudly than others. The actions of a small but visible segment of the population could be a symbolic but essential catalyst for wider cultural change. Weren't the suffragette, abolitionist, and American civil rights movements initially made up of a small number of individuals committed to positive change?

### **b) If you decide to fly less you are inspiring others**

People fly less when others around them, especially influential figures, fly less or stop flying. Research by Steve Westlake found that of those who know such an individual, around half fly less as a result, and around three quarters say knowing that person has changed their attitudes<sup>[^30]</sup>. When communicated effectively, the action of an individual sends ripples across the many social relations that each of us is part of – local communities, work places, professional associations, hobby and sports

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## **Flying less is about exploring all available options**

People who stop flying or begin flying less often talk about the pleasures of discovering that one's lifestyle can be re-set<sup>[40]</sup> when non-flying options are properly considered and that aviation is not as necessary as it may seem - even if you are a travel writer as Evelina Utterdahl has demonstrated<sup>[41]</sup>! Frequent flyers including many academics should take an opportunity to re-set their values and rethink why they fly and whether it is strictly necessary<sup>[42]</sup>. Do I really need to attend that conference<sup>[43]</sup>? Why not an on-line presentation? Would I attend it if it took place in a less attractive place? Am I really attending because of the benefits to my work or because of the tourism opportunities it provides? How much is flying related to status seeking in academia and other jobs? Isn't it possible to keep updated about your research field by using the many on-line resources available? Is

flying really unavoidable or is it that I am reluctant to change my habits? Work places can help in promoting a new culture of doing business and research. For example, the Tyndall Centre for Climate Change Research has issued guidelines for helping their own staff to consider every non-flying option possible<sup>[44]</sup>. This is now being used by other institutions. <br></br>

## **Flying less does not mean giving up holidays abroad**

Although long-distance travel by train and ship does not currently receive the same support as airport expansion, in Europe it is still possible to travel comfortably by these means of transport. The flying less movement hopes that enough people will demand and use lower carbon land and sea travel options so that eventually it becomes easier to visit distant places without jumping on a plane. This was the aim of Kate Andrews, co-founder of Loco2<sup>[45]</sup>, a London-based start up whose mission is to make booking a train in Europe as easy as booking a flight. Many people plan their railway journeys with the help of The Man in Seat 61<sup>[46]</sup>. <br></br>

## **A growing movement**

Flying is so engrained in the lifestyles of more affluent segments that the possibility that sometime in the near future people may fly less, much less, may seem implausible. Yet recent developments suggest that what we regard as normal in travel can change faster than some people realize. In Sweden, the debate about flying has been taking place in mainstream media since January 2018 and is now part of everyday conversations. Celebrities such as Olympian gold medallist and Sports TV presenter Björn Ferry and opera singer Malena Ernman, and ordinary citizens such as mothers Maja Rosén<sup>[47]</sup> and Lotta Hammar who launched the campaign Flight Free 2019 (Flygfritt 2019<sup>[48]</sup>), have played a key role in raising awareness. According to Agence France-Presse<sup>[49]</sup>, 'in March 2019 the World Wildlife Foundation published a survey indicating that nearly one in five Swedes had chosen to travel by rail rather than by air in order to minimise their environmental impact<sup>[50]</sup>.' According to the same source, 'a survey published in Sweden's leading travel magazine, Vagabond, said 64 per cent of those who travelled abroad less last year did so because of climate reasons.' A separate survey by Swedish Radio showed that the climate is the most important political topic for young people today. After a sustained growth in the number of airline passengers for almost ten years (from 31 million in 2009 to more than 39 million in 2018) growth of international flights slowed down in 2018 (from 9%



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The debate about flying less has spread to Finland. According to sustainability researcher Arne Granlund<sup>[^53]</sup>, the debate gained momentum at the end of 2018 and is taking place in a wide range of contexts from youth organisations, the church and the education system, to some political parties, some large corporations and the sports world. A survey conducted in March 2019<sup>[^54]</sup> shows that 'Four out of five Finns consider that urgent action is needed to mitigate climate change' and a third of the population has calculated its own carbon footprint. Interestingly, 'About 40% of the Finns have reduced flying because of climate reasons. About the same share of the respondents intend to fly less within the next five years. A little less than half (45%) have travelled by air over the past year'. A Facebook group called "Maata pitkin matkustavat", connecting people committed to ground travel, has organised its own flying less travel fair.

Signs of an incipient new culture of travel in Scandinavia are visible in the decisions of newspapers in Sweden and Denmark to refocus their travel sections to cover domestic and European destinations easily accessible by public transport. Sweden's third most popular morning newspaper, Svenska Dagbladet, is halving the number of reports about destinations further than a five hour flight, and doubling the number of articles about destinations in the Nordic countries. According to Associated Press<sup>[^55]</sup>, Politiken, 'one of Denmark's main newspapers is ceasing domestic air travel and reducing international flights for assignments to a bare minimum. [...] The

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Flying less policies are beginning to be discussed and / or adopted by a growing number of European academic institutions. Examples include Bristol University, Edinburgh University, Lancaster Environment Centre, UK Innovation Agency, the Met Office, Lund University Centre for Sustainability Studies, ETH Zürich.

On the other side of the Atlantic, for the first time the Biennial Conference of Cultural Anthropology took place online in 2018 in order to reduce travel-related carbon emissions and to facilitate a broader participation from academics facing visa restrictions<sup>[^58]</sup>. Calls are being made for other big conferences to follow suit. Anthropologist Jason Hickel has called for an end of the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA)<sup>[^59]</sup> arguing that in an age of dangerous climate change, unnecessary flights cannot be morally justified and go against the professional ethics code of the AAA which states that 'Anthropological researchers must do everything in their power to ensure that their research does not harm the safety of the people with whom they work.' He calls on anthropologists to

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breaks-that-hurt-the-environment) and report by the Institute for Policy Studies (<https://ips-dc.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/06/HighFlyersReport.pdf>). [^16]: See <https://www.transportenvironment.org/news/eu-urged-stand-firm-aircraft-emissions>. CORSIA is an approach by the United Nation's aviation agency (ICAO) to 'offset' growth in aviation after 2020. A recent academic review concluded that this plan 'will not deliver any major emission reductions' (<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14693062.2018.1562871>). See also report about offsetting in EU's aviation climate strategy ([https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/ets/docs/clean\\_dev\\_mechanism\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/clima/sites/clima/files/ets/docs/clean_dev_mechanism_en.pdf)) and climate scientist Kevin Anderson's views on offsetting (<https://kevinanderson.info/blog/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Offsetting-interview-for-Nature-Climate-Change-Pre-edit-April-20121.pdf>). [^17]: In the UK the organisation Fellow Travellers is campaigning for the introduction of a 'frequent flyer levy' that would tax people according to how often they fly (<http://afreeride.org/>). [^18]: See <https://stay-grounded.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/The-Illusion-of-Green-Flying.pdf>. Aviation is responsible for 2.4% of global energy-related CO2 emissions. However, the global warming impact of aviation is larger. This is because emissions at high altitude have an enhanced impact on climate through the process of 'radiative forcing' (<https://www.britannica.com/science/radiative-forcing>). According to a conservative estimate radiative forcing is thought to more than double the global warming impact of aviation (an estimated 4.9% of man-made global warming) (<https://www.transportenvironment.org/news/aviation-2-3-times-more-damaging-climate-industry-claims>). [^19]: The potential of biofuels and alternative sustainable fuels to decarbonise aviation is limited. Synthetic electro-fuels (synthetic fuel produced through combining hydrogen with carbon from CO2) is one possible way to decarbonise fuel demand according to the environmental organisation Transport & Environment (<https://www.transportenvironment.org/publications/roadmap-decarbonising-european-aviation>). However, it is not an easy task. T&E argues that 'using electrofuels to meet expected remaining fuel demand for aviation in 2050 would require renewable electricity equivalent to some 28% of Europe's total electricity generation in 2015 or 95% of the electricity currently generated using renewables in Europe. Fellow Travellers notes that the development of electro-fuels is 'almost certainly necessary, but it will not be sufficient on its own to bring aviation emissions within safe limits; even if implemented in full' (<https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/media.afreeride.org/documents/Electric+Dreams.pdf>). A study from the International Council on Clean Transportation on the cost of producing alternative jet fuels in the European Union found that overall the cost, even for the



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Living Beyond Nature's Limits, the EU uses almost 20% of the Earth's biocapacity although it comprises only 7% of the world population. In other words, 2.8 planets would be needed if everyone consumed at the rate of the average EU resident. This is well above the world average which is approximately 1.7 planets. Whether at the regional or global level, human demand on nature is way beyond what is sustainable for our planet' (

[http://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/wwf\\_eu\\_overshoot\\_day\\_living\\_beyond\\_nature.pdf](http://d2ouvy59p0dg6k.cloudfront.net/downloads/wwf_eu_overshoot_day_living_beyond_nature.pdf)).

[^39]: <https://medium.com/@kovamic/tales-of-trying-to-fly-less-5883a1858c3f>

[^40]: <https://noflyclimatesci.org/biographies> [^41]:

<https://www.flightfree.co.uk/post/evelina-utterdahl-earth-wanderess> [^42]:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1470160X13002306> [^43]:

Attending conferences accounts for most of academia's carbon footprint (see <https://mathemagicalconservation.wordpress.com/2017/08/10/conferences-urgently-need-environmental-policies/>) and most of the carbon footprint of international

conferences comes from transatlantic or intercontinental flights (see

<https://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1746-692X.12106>).

[^44]: <https://tyndall.ac.uk/publications/tyndall-working-paper/2015/towards-culture-low-carbon-research-21st-century> [^45]:

<https://loco2.com/> [^46]:

<https://www.seat61.com/> [^47]: <https://medium.com/wedonthavetime/the-smart-way-to-make-others-give-up-flying-49cd6bd1272e> [^48]:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-europe-46362159/the-two-swedish-mums-who-want-people-to-give-up-flying-for-a-year> [^49]:

<https://phys.org/news/2019-04-flight-shame-swedes-rethinking-air.html> [^50]: <https://www.wwf.se/pressmeddelande/wwfs-klimatbarometer-allt-fler-valjer-bort-flyg-och-kott-och-kvinnorna-gar-fore-3241404/>

[^51]: <https://www.dn.se/nyheter/sverige/trenden-har-vant-flygresandet-minskar/>

[^52]: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/climate-environment/news/swedens-new-carbon-tax/> [^53]:

<https://www.sitra.fi/en/people/aarne-granlund/> [^54]:

[https://valtioneuvosto.fi/artikkeli/-/asset\\_publisher/ilmastobarometri-2019-suomalaiset-haluavat-ilmastokriisin-ratkaisut-politiikan-ytimeen?\\_101\\_INSTANCE\\_3wyslLo1Z0ni\\_languageId=en\\_US](https://valtioneuvosto.fi/artikkeli/-/asset_publisher/ilmastobarometri-2019-suomalaiset-haluavat-ilmastokriisin-ratkaisut-politiikan-ytimeen?_101_INSTANCE_3wyslLo1Z0ni_languageId=en_US) [^55]:

<https://www.apnews.com/b31a0e98d1134f8b94ae8db5f5d0d2b8> [^56]:

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/technology/flight-shame-has-swedes-rethinking-air-travel/ar-BBVMEbg> [^57]:

<https://www.thelocal.se/20190411/reader-voices-how-do-internationals-in-sweden-feel-about-the-growing-anti-flying-campaigns> [^58]:

<https://displacements.jhu.edu/> [^59]: <https://anthrodendum.org/2018/01/13/climate-change-ethics-code-end-aaa-annual-meeting/>

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Discipline

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