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Plastic bags and carbon trading: Who's zoomin' who?

By John Doyle

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CBC's Doc Zone looks at global warming and asks whether carbon offsets are a solution

Me, I'm not exactly sure of the connection between plastic shopping bags and global warming.

However, I think there is supposed to be a connection. Hence the decision, in Toronto, to forbid stores from handing out plastic bags with a purchase and requiring a 5-cent charge for a bag. To be honest with you, I think it's ludicrous. It requires people to purchase heavy-duty shopping bags (usually plastic and made in China) that have a limited lifespan and when inevitably discarded will take, oh, about 1,000 years to disintegrate. It also requires people to buy heavy-duty plastic bags for their garbage containers, instead of reusing the small bags from the store. Riddle me that.

It's a racket. And I've noticed - because I live in an area where there is a dog-walking mania - that there's a helluva lot more dog poop on the pavements. Why? Probably because nobody has the plastic bags from the store to do the poop-and-scoop thing. Honestly, an inordinate amount of my time is spent dodging the stuff on the ground.

Like most people, I think I'm a tad confused about what we're all supposed to be doing, what's best for the environment and, simultaneously, deeply suspicious that there's a huge, profitable racket in confusing people.

Soon I expect that in Toronto there will be a new industry - people-for-hire who advise you on what goes into the blue bin, the grey bin, the green bin and what requires very, very special permission to discard. Another racket - people making money off total confusion about global warming.

Carbon Hunters (CBC, 8 p.m.) opens with this terror-inducing question: "If global warming is the crisis of our age, can we do anything to stop it?" There follows an exploration of global carbon trading, a much-misunderstood thing. Sometimes called emissions trading, carbon offset, or cap and trade, the carbon-trading business has emerged as very lucrative. It's a market-driven solution, giving those who pollute the chance to pay something to offset their negative impact.

Some people say it's a total crock. Companies that are responsible for unsustainable practices get an environmental credibility they don't deserve, as one pundit explains on the program.

Mind you, the skeptics don't exactly get tons of attention here. We meet Maurice Strong, the Canadian who was the first executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme, and who supports the carbon-hunting phenomenon.

"Yes, there's some profiteering but not enough to negate the concept," he says. We also hear about the Chicago Climate Exchange, where carbon offsets are traded and money is made.

A lot of attention is paid to Vancouver entrepreneur Shawn Burns. He believes that carbon hunting helps stop global warming and that there is plenty of money to be made. The CEO of Carbon Credit Corp., Burns is a trader always in search of ways to broker carbon offsets and turn a profit. We watch as he has a phone conversation with a Texas oil billionaire who wants to develop a project in the Amazon rain forest and needs a way to offset the impact by buying carbon credits. We also watch as Burns and his team do high-fives after the phone conversation, as they anticipate a financial windfall.

That's when the program has an almost surreal element to it. The viewer may well ask, "Who's zoomin' who, here?"

Things get even stranger when the program enters the showbiz racket. We hear about the band Coldplay's plan to offset its carbon footprint for a world tour by having mango trees planted somewhere. The plan was a disaster, but Coldplay presses on trying to do the right thing.

Further, we hear about Hollywood stars getting involved in carbon-offset trading to make up for all those limos and private-plane trips. And then, speaking of planes, we get a sense of an Air Canada program that allows passengers to buy an offset.

The upshot is that *Carbon Hunters* presents a perplexing picture of something that is still tricky, if not downright impossible to understand.

And yes, the program, made by Vancouver filmmaker/journalist and former Globe and Mail writer Miro Cernetig, gives me the impression that it's all a racket. Totally like the plastic bag thing.