



Global Carbon Emissions

Has the U.S. “exported” its carbon emissions to China by relying on China to manufacture so many of our goods? There seems to be growing support for the idea that carbon emissions should be tied to consumption of goods rather than their manufacture, as the NY Times [reported](#) recently. There is a grain of truth to the idea. But consumer responsibility should be considered secondary. The primary responsibility rests with producers.

Most of the debate has been about climate change. But it may be easier to think through the issue in a less contentious context. Consider the problem of water pollution in the Mississippi River, which results in the infamous dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico.

Agricultural runoff in the Midwest is a big part of the problem. A significant portion of the U.S. corn and soybean crops are exported to Asia.

Does this mean that Asians have a responsibility to help us solve our water pollution problem, maybe by paying Midwestern farmers to adopt more sustainable practices? Have the Chinese “exported” their agricultural pollution problem to the U.S.? This idea seems dubious. It seems obvious that it is Americans who have the primary responsibility for reducing the water pollution caused by our own agriculture runoff, regardless of where the crops are sold. The same logic seems to apply to carbon emissions.

Some people might argue that the two situations aren’t comparable because of the economic disparity between the two countries. But it’s not as if we’ve somehow forced the Chinese to produce cheap goods for us or blocked them from controlling their carbon emissions. China is very much an autonomous actor into today’s world.

The best argument for consumer responsibility may be based on a benefit theory. You might argue that the Chinese should pay for our water pollution, and we should pay for their carbon emissions, on the theory that in both situations consumers have benefitted from lower prices in the past made possible by the lack of sustainable practices. But this idea of indirect benefit seems to have no limits. Grain prices are competitive, so if American grain is sold at lower prices because we overuse fertilizers, so is other grain. Thus, even people who are buying grain from places with no water pollution problems are benefitting from the existence of cheaper, non-American grain.

So really, based on the benefit argument, anyone who eats grain anywhere in the world should be held responsible for America’s unsustainable practices. Indeed, we could trace the benefits even further. If prices of grain are lower due to America’s unsustainable agricultural practices, people can take the money they save on food and spend it elsewhere, so the producers of other goods are also benefitting.

Similarly, if the Chinese are producing cheaper steel because they don’t control their carbon emissions, anyone who buys steel from any source is benefitting from the downward pressure on steel prices, and the ripple effects

go even further. There's really no way of giving an accurate accounting of who around the world is better off and by how much. So the idea of allocating responsibility on the basis of economic benefit, while it may *seem* appealing, just isn't workable.

At this point, I'm not prepared to reject completely the idea that consumers may in some circumstances be complicit in actions by producers. Under some circumstances, perhaps consumers have a duty to stop purchasing a product or to attempt to change producer behavior. But the primary responsibility for producer behavior should remain with the producers themselves.