

Decarbonise together, not owner by owner

International co-ordination is required to avoid an unholy hugger-mugger of national and regional rules and private initiatives. Step forward, Albert Embankment

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By [Lloyd's List](#)

Shipping is a dirty industry, and planting a few carbon offset trees and hoping for the best is not going to convince the world otherwise



THE NEED IS TO PREVENT EMISSIONS GETTING INTO THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

A FEW years back, clothing retailers hit on the ruse of paying others to plant a few saplings for every T-shirt they sold, and supermarket chains started inundating city dwellers without gardens with fully compostable plastic bags.

Then they began marketing themselves as 'carbon neutral'. But sadly for such branding efforts, cynicism is kicking in. The game is up for greenwashers.

The public knows that carbon offsetting and biodegradable plastics are only palliatives. The need is to prevent emissions getting into the atmosphere in the first place.

Shipping cannot and should not replicate fast fashion's tactics. We have to start from the realisation that we emit carbon and then some, and that is only one aspect of the harm we otherwise facilitate.

Much of our lunch comes from hauling fossil fuels, intrusively extracted mineral ores and soya grown on illegal slash and burn plantations that take out country-size chunks of the Amazon rainforest each year for vast distances around the planet.

We deliver them to serve as inputs for smokestack industries, on vessels still largely fuelled by the crud left over when oil refineries have finished with everything else.

And sometimes we even spill those bunkers over pristine Mediterranean beaches, as Israel and Lebanon recently found out.

Even five years ago, the collective response could fairly have been described as woeful. It is gratifying that industry leaders are now doing things instead of just talking about doing things.

But hold off the self-congratulatory pat on the back just yet. We not going far enough, we're not going fast enough, and we are nowhere near cohesive enough in what we do.

The agenda is still essentially responsive. Shipping's impressively ineffective history of regulatory progress can be read as a series of reactive measures, almost always undertaken in isolation from their unintended but unconsidered consequences.

The agenda is still limited. The half-promise of half-decarbonisation by 2050 envisaged by the IMO is risible in light of what is technically possible now, never mind what will be technically possible three decades hence.

Even our customers are getting impatient with the lack of progress. When a United Nations agency is blasted as laggardly by the likes of BP and Trafigura, it is clearly proceeding too slowly.

And the agenda is still unco-ordinated. Lack of a decisive lead from the top has prohibited the emergence of what politicians call 'joined-up policies'.

Instead, the vacuum has been filled by the piecemeal strategies of individual companies and multiple regulatory agencies.

A case in point is the Poseidon Principles, where banks have unilaterally decided to link lending to environmental criteria.

The Sea Cargo Charter brings energy majors and cargo interests together in a full disclosure pledge that assesses alignment with decarbonisation targets.

Meanwhile, Maersk has decided to go it alone for a zero-carbon future, without waiting for the rest of us.

All three steps are commendable in isolation, but we must avoid the unenticing prospect of hugger-mugger descent into national and regional rules and private initiatives, which carries dangers of its own.

In an industry split between thousands of owners and an agglomeration of trade associations, avoidance of such an obviously undesirable scenario means that the International Maritime Organization will have to take a lead. No-one else can.

The good news is that very act of co-ordination will likely multiply the benefits and maybe even bring down costs.

Climate change will be a central issue in world politics in coming decades. This one isn't just going to go away, and shipping can't just hide in a corner and hope nobody notices.

Put simply, we can't engage in damage limitation just by shelling out for a couple of thousand acres of new forests. The time for a collective decarbonisation endeavour is before the tumbrils roll.

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