

[Just what are the UK's carbon emissions?](#) [1]

Written by [Tim Worstall](#) [2] | Monday 11 August 2008



A slightly odd (and definitely geeky) thing to do but I'm going to praise some environmental research that has just been published. Yes, even something from the Stockholm Environment Institute. (Summary [here](#) [3], full report [here](#) [4].) Whether their calculations are entirely correct or not isn't my point: it's that they are trying to answer an interesting question.

A little background. There are, over and above the way that the UN and IPCC measure emissions two others in common usage. The first is producer emissions: add up all the CO₂ (actually, CO₂-e but never mind) emissions in a country. But that doesn't take account of imports and exports. OK, so there's another measure: consumer emissions. This adds in to what is produced in the UK what is embodied in the things we import. However, in one of those remarkable twists of the way in which statistics are defined, such consumer numbers do not take account of the CO₂ embedded in what we export....those emissions clearly being associated with the consumption habits of those in other countries rather than our own. It's not really all that much of a surprise that there are those who like to quote this latter number, despite the clear and obvious double counting.

What the new report tries to do is estimate the real balance. How much CO₂ is embedded in what we import and how much in what we export (and yes, they look at re-exports too)? So that we can come up with a number that truly reflects the emissions from our consumption.

It's not really a surprise that our consumption emissions are higher than our production ones. Firstly, we run a large trade deficit on goods so we obviously import more "things" than export them. Secondly, our goods exports tend to be high value added items (jet engines say) rather than physical resource or energy intensive ones (aluminium say) so again we'd expect to be importing more CO₂ than exporting. Finally, we're one of the world's great exporters of services rather than goods and yes, there's less CO₂ embedded in the former than the latter.

So, yes, our consumption numbers are higher than our production ones: for we're a high tech, services orientated economy. So far so geeky and perhaps not all *that* interesting. However, now that we've got the distinctions between the various statistics out of the way we can keep a sharp eye open for those who would misuse them. Using the trade adjusted consumer numbers the report [says that](#) [5]:

...rather than going down by 5 per cent, as ministers claimed, CO₂ emissions have gone up 18 per cent between 1992 and 2004 when all emissions are counted.

However, there's another report coming from the same source soon:

An SEI report to be published soon by the campaign group WWF will suggest that the UK's total greenhouse gas emissions are 49 per cent higher than reported.

I wonder what definition that will use? Consumer perhaps, unadjusted for exports?

But Stuart Bond, WWF's head of research, said: "This shows our claims on emissions are simply a big lie."

Could be Stuart, could be, we'll judge your claims on that lies, damned lies and statistics spectrum when you release your report, shall we?

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