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# The trails that spell trouble for the planet

Last updated at 09:25am on 16th March 2007

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If you've ever wondered how crowded our skies are, here's the answer in blue and white.

This stunning picture charts the course of dozens of planes flying over London's Hyde Park in a two-hour period.

Although beautiful, the vapour trails littering the cobalt blue sky are far from harmless. Experts believe they are exacerbating global warming.

Made up almost entirely of water and hanging miles above the ground, the trails can linger for days or disappear within minutes.

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Busy skies: How bad are aeroplanes for the planet?

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Known as contrails in the aviation world, they form when water vapour heated by the engines hits the cold sky and condenses to form millions of tiny water droplets or ice crystals.

Some of the water vapour is produced by the breakdown of fuel, while the rest comes from the atmosphere.

While their height and high water content means they are not a direct hazard to human health, contrails trap heat which would otherwise be dispersed into space.

It is thought that in this way, they contribute at least as much to climate change as the carbon dioxide produced by aviation. Vapour trails tend to form at high altitude - at heights of five to six miles - and at temperatures of

minus 40C to minus 50C.

The aircraft shown in the picture, which was taken on Wednesday morning, were cruising at altitudes of 20,000ft and 35,000ft, or 3.8miles and 6.6miles.

The image is actually a mosaic of dozens of different pictures taken between 10am and midday.

As each of the planes followed a similar route, but at different times, their flight paths have been moved up or down the picture to allow each to be seen in full.

In reality, those which were passing overhead at the same time would have been separated by at least 1,000ft in height, or five miles to the side, front or back.

The true number of planes crossing the sky, was around double the 31 shown, as the strong sunlight made it impossible to photograph those passing in the southern sky.

Those captured on film are too high in the sky to have taken off from London or be destined for one of the city's airports.

Instead, they are simply passing through British skies as they travel from the Continent to North America or Ireland, or from Scandinavia to south-western Europe and North Africa.

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Here's a sample of the latest comments published. You can click [view all](#) to read all comments that readers have sent in.

Insufficient notice has been taken of the amount of fuel expressed from jet aircraft, which then drifts down to the ground. To gain an idea of what this can and does do, if you live under the flight path of any aircraft, go outside and run your finger over the outside of any window. You will find that finger to have an oily substance on it, this is kerosene from jet aircraft.

**- Stuart, Zavalla, Tx, USA**

Forget trying to reduce carbon emmissions, now the "experts" are blaming global warming on WATER droplets?

Maybe if we give these "experts" enough money for research they will be able to "save" our planet by finding a way to stop it RAINING.

**- Brian, Chonburi, Thailand**

Anyone who watched channel 4's 'The Great Global Warming Swindle' knows, as I have ALWAYS said, human contribution to global warming is almost ZERO, and this is all about controlling economies, more accurately trying to hurt the US economy.

Sunspots cause global warming. Not people. It's all a big scam.

**- Frank, Crawley, UK**

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