



NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS INITIATIVE

On the misuse of nature-based carbon offsets



1 Nature-based solutions (NbS*) are being misused for greenwashing.

Promoting NbS as carbon 'offsets' while continuing business as usual in fossil fuel use is not a solution to climate change. In fact, it can encourage continued or even increased fossil fuel consumption leading to more emissions overall and can distract from the need for systemic change and a transition to a nature-positive economy¹.

2 NbS can make an important contribution to reaching net zero emissions, but only if combined with dramatic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions

(e.g. by burning less fossil fuel). Well-designed NbS, including the vital protection of carbon stored in intact ecosystems, play a key role in climate change mitigation as well as supporting other societal goals such as climate change adaptation, economic recovery and biodiversity conservation^{2,3}. However, if they are not combined with rapid emission reductions, then impacts of climate change such as fires, droughts and disease will cause the carbon stored in ecosystems to be released back into the atmosphere, leading to further acceleration of climate change^{4,5}.

3 Poor quality nature-based 'offsets' may have limited or negative effects on climate change mitigation as well as adverse impacts on biodiversity.

Poorly planned carbon offset schemes, such as inappropriate tree planting on natural grasslands and peatlands, can add more carbon to the atmosphere than they take up (as carbon-rich soils are disturbed)^{6,7,8}. There can also be negative impacts on biodiversity as the many species that depend on these naturally open habitats are lost^{9,10}.

4 Poor quality nature-based 'offsets' can lead to human rights abuses.

Some projects have been implemented without regard to the legal or customary land use rights of local people^{11,12}. When this occurs, carbon offsetting can shift the burden of reducing emissions from wealthy countries, companies or individuals (who have contributed the most to climate change) to vulnerable people in the Global South (who have contributed the least)¹³. Furthermore, projects that are not led by or co-implemented with local people and fail to bring social benefits are less likely to be maintained as carbon stores in the long term^{10,14}.

5 Fossil fuel extraction is often socially and ecologically destructive^{15,16,17}.

Using NbS to 'offset' the use of fossil fuels distracts attention from addressing these harmful impacts on people and the environment.

For further information on policy guidelines on how to implement successful, sustainable NbS that avoid social and environmental pitfalls please visit nbsguidelines.info and read our paper on [getting the message right on nature-based solutions](#); for guidance criteria on how to implement NbS with integrity visit [IUCN's Global Standard for NbS](#).

*NbS are ways of working with nature to address societal challenges, providing benefits for human well-being and biodiversity. They are actions that involve the protection, restoration or management of natural and semi-natural ecosystems; the sustainable management of aquatic systems and working lands such as croplands or timberlands; or the creation of novel ecosystems in and around cities.

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