

Biodiversity offsetting in England: social implications

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Introduction

Biodiversity offsetting is a way of compensating for the impacts of a development project in one place by creating or protecting biodiversity somewhere else.

Proponents of biodiversity offsetting present the policy as socially neutral and apolitical. However, biodiversity offsetting is a highly political process in the way it changes both the development and the offset sites. Experimentation with biodiversity offsetting in several places across England during 2012-2015 triggered fierce local debate because of the policy’s potential to have negative environmental impacts



and its failure to take account of local wishes and social needs. Opposition to such development projects, such as the Lodge Hill housing development in South East England or the new HS2 London-Birmingham train line, attracted significant media attention that challenged the ‘win-win’ rhetoric previously used by the UK government to

frame biodiversity offsetting. Local communities across the country seriously challenged biodiversity offsetting from a socio-spatial and environmental justice perspective mainly on the following grounds:

Offsetting relocates nature across space and time

Offsetting involves a series of technical calculations to establish the extent to which different ecosystems, in

different places, can be thought of as equivalent. These involve calculating ‘conservation credits’ that mean that

environmental damage in one place can be compensated by environmental protection (or creation)

“You know they said well we can do a swap, we can drive out biodiversity in this area and we’ll set up something in the middle of Northumberland, which is not accessible to the city people. You see that’s the whole point, city people have a right to enjoy their biodiversity on their doorstep. Without having to drive out in a car into the middle of nowhere”
Local activist against the housing developments in North Tyneside

somewhere else. This involves three interrelated steps:

- First, the characteristics and quality of biodiversity units are measured quantitatively on the basis of ecological surveys.
- Second, ecological losses and gains in offset and development sites are calculated.
- Third, the biodiversity units lost or recreated are compared. This basis of biodiversity offsetting is numerical scoring. These numbers form the basis for the creation of conservation credits whose exchange and trading allows the spatial redistribution of environmental harms and goods across space and time contributing to the introduction of

conservation banking and biodiversity ‘markets’.

The calculation of equivalence between development and offset sites takes account of the calculated ‘amount’ and ‘quality’ of biodiversity, but not *where* it is located. Where an offset site is far from the development site, offsetting redistributes public access to land of conservation value. For example, in Lodge Hill in South East England, creation of a ‘Nightingale Compensation Area’ was proposed at Foulness in Essex, about 20km away, north of the Thames estuary. In North Tyneside, no offset site was identified close to the proposed housing development, because North Tyneside was already very built up, and

the City Council was seeking to use all available sites for new housing.

Offsetting does not stop the loss of nature; it simply displaces and redistributes environmental damage. The net effect of offsetting on halting biodiversity loss in England can therefore at best be zero, because what is supposedly ‘saved’ in one place is only saved by the sacrifice of biodiversity elsewhere. Offsetting, therefore, does not solve the problem of biodiversity loss, it simply moves it around.

Offsetting ignores place and culture

Biodiversity offset metrics represent ecosystems, and thus places, across England as abstracted biodiversity ‘units’ and/or ‘credits’, and treats them as if they

were equivalent. The metrics take no account of the cultural importance of place, social ties between communities and green space, or the consequences for

wellbeing, these are all excluded from the calculations of offsetting. Offsetting metrics ignore local traditions and meanings. Offsetting displaces local ecologies

and ultimately transforms social relations. Thus, for example, in the Coventry Gateway it was proposed to create a new country park as compensation for an existing countryside within the green belt that was familiar to and used by local people. In the case of the HS2 rail line, compensation in the form of newly planted woodland was calculated only in terms of habitat area, without considering the cultural values of existing mature woodland.

Biodiversity offsetting operates as if places were interchangeable. It makes possible the exchange of nature in different places – indeed it facilitates that exchange. Rather than places being understood as having local distinctiveness, meaning and histories, offsetting treats them as a set of standardized ‘sites’, whose ecological value is measured, and which can be secured by spending money. Offsetting treats England as placeless, shorn of geographical difference.



Offsetting favors the inclusion of experts and developers and the exclusion of local communities

Biodiversity offsetting changes the scale at which governance takes place. It gives more power to new actors – particularly private sector organizations wishing to develop land – and takes power away from local communities. It turns conservation into a matter for experts and technocrats by portraying the whole process as primarily ‘technical’ (and indeed making the process highly technical in the calculation of offset metrics). Local communities often lack the necessary scientific expertise to judge the metrics used, and are therefore prevented from challenging proposed development plans based on biodiversity offsetting. Biodiversity offsetting empowers unaccountable institutions such as private companies working as conservation brokers and consultants.

Conclusions

Biodiversity offsetting is presented as an impartial technical process for constructing equivalence between development and offset sites. Under the surface, offsetting in reality brings unevenness, socio-spatial and environmental injustices. The substitute ecosystems and places that its metrics identify can only be seen as equivalent to the nature lost in the very narrow technical view of offsetting calculations. Offsetting treats nature as something that can be relocated via a market to facilitate development. It conceptualizes ecosystems as ahistorical non-places to legitimize the distribution of biodiversity lost and gained in a way that serves development interests.

The application of biodiversity offsetting around England shows how it can be contested. Valued places can prove a significant obstacle to the remaking of nature, becoming spaces of resistance against the spatial socio-environmental injustices that biodiversity offsetting produces.

“So the whole idea of offsetting is you can take it away to more suitable locations and do it there. But for example here our woodland is not just a bit of habitat, it’s an amenity. We use it, kids use it, walkers use it, it’s a real local amenity. So if offsetting were done elsewhere we’d obviously be losing our amenity and not getting anything back in place of it”
STOP HS2 campaigner

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